

Different Shadows
Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema

u

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

September 2006

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Abstract

Different Shadows: Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema studies the role of cinema in the rise of Israeli gay consciousness over the past three decades. One aim of this research is to map Israeli gay cinema by situating it in relation to other Israeli and non-Israeli films, the hegemonic values of dominant Israeli culture and the idea/l of a unified Israeli gay community. Another aim is to explore the ways in which cinema, as a primary source of gay cultural production in Israel, has defined gay identity and community since the late 1970s.

The thesis brings together two objects of study. One is Israeli society, including the gay movement. This branch of the research studies the history of the gay movement and the incorporation of gay men and lesbians into the Israeli public sphere. The other is Israeli cinema, including production and distribution apparatuses as well as the film texts themselves. This branch examines representations of gay life on the screen along the axes of ethnicity, gender, nation and religion, the reception of films both in Israel and abroad, and matters of censorship. The thesis focuses on the mutual influences these two objects of study have on one another, namely the way in which cinema has contributed to the promotion of gay causes in Israel, and the way in which gay concerns have enriched Israeli films both visually and thematically.

The project crosses and links various disciplines and encompasses different approaches to the films. Combining film theory, institutional and textual analysis, employing the tools of post-colonialism and queer theory as well as theories of race, nation and feminist criticism, I attend to the complexities of the representation of gay culture and identity and its organization and legibility through culture.

A note on style: I have used the MLA style for citing and referencing throughout the thesis.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following institutions for their financial support: University College London for the Graduate Open Scholarship; the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme; the Anglo-Jewish Association for the Ian Karten Scholarship and the Arts and Humanities Research Board for the Fieldwork Grant.

I am deeply grateful for my supervisors, David Forgacs and Tsila Ratner, for the invaluable insight and consistent support they have given me from the very start. This project would not have been completed without them.

I would like to express my special gratitude to the following people, who, apart from their friendship, offered me much of their time and effort: to Yosefa Loshitzky for reading early versions of this thesis and making very important comments; to Ross Forman for constantly encouraging me in the researching and writing process and for reading drafts and papers; to Shimshi Ben-Ron for his incredibly important suggestions; to Raz Yosef for sharing his knowledge with me; and to Selina Packard and Ofer Rog for spending long hours selecting images, proof-reading and making significant comments.

I would also like to thank all the people at the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at UCL, and especially Ada Rapoport-Albert, James Renton, Michael Berkowitz, John Klier, Emma Harris and Lia Kahn-Zajtmann, for their great interest in my project and their encouragement.

Special thanks go to the people at the Sam Spiegel Film School in Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv Cinematheque library as well as to the following filmmakers for providing me with films, written materials and images: David Deri, Elle Flanders, Tomer Heymann, Yair Hochner, Ran Kotzer, Yair Lev, Nir Ne'eman, Ruthie Shatz, and Sigal Yehuda.

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking my friends for their support: Yason Banal, Nimrod Ben-Cnaan, Einav Ben-Yehuda, Pedro Castelo, Eleanor Chiari, Eyal Cohen, Hagi Cohen, Joao de Campos Cruz, Mark Doran, Yael Friedman, Naomi Fry, Kalliopi Georgiadou, Adi Golani, Inbal Keidar, Lily Khan, Tamar Kutner, Alex Mankowitz, Cristina Massaccesi, Daniela Melman,

Nikos Panayiotou, Anat Pick, Steven Redelman, Claudia Ribeiro, Natasha Romanova, Michal Shapira, Yaron Silberberg, Itamar Zohar.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, my parents, Miri and Menachem, and my brother, Shai, for all the love, support, care, and pride I could ever ask for.

Chapter 1

Israeli Cinema and the Gay Movement: An Introductory Essay

This thesis studies the role of cinema as an important force in the rise of the Israeli gay movement in the past three decades, particularly in the wake of its legal battles for equal rights in the 1980s and 1990s. Alongside literature, journalism and popular music, cinema has contributed to the shift of gay men and lesbians from the margins of Israeli society into its mainstream. Despite the canonical status of the written word as the main vehicle for forging the Zionist-Israeli national narrative as well as its subversive derivatives, the emergence of the gay movement in the mid-1970s relied more on cinematic representations than literary ones. Films have also reached wider overseas audiences and have emphasized gay men and lesbians' role in representing "liberal" Israel to the world.

This thesis is a work of cultural history that aims to understand self-proclaimed gay cinema in Israel in relation to a particular, and distinctively Israeli, ideological trajectory – Zionism/Muscle Jew/ruralism/militarism – to be reconstructed later in this chapter. The thesis attempts to explore the ways in which cinema, as a primary source of gay cultural production in Israel, has defined gay identity since the late 1970s. As Jeffrey Weeks has argued, following the writings of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx

identity is not inborn, pregiven, or 'natural'. It is striven for, contested, negotiated, and achieved, often in struggles of the subordinated against the dominant. Moreover, it is not achieved just by an individual act of will, or discovered hidden in the recesses of the soul. It is put together in circumstances bequeathed by history, in collective experiences, as much as by individual destiny. ("Against Nature" 207)

This research also brings together two different objects of study. One is Israeli society, including the gay movement. This branch of the research studies the history of the gay movement and the incorporation of gay men and lesbians into the Israeli public sphere. The other is Israeli cinema, film texts in particular but also production and distribution apparatuses. This branch examines the

representations of gay life on the screen along the axes of ethnicity, gender, nation and religion, the reception of the films both in Israel and abroad and matters of censorship, both self-imposed by writers/directors and external. I am especially interested in the mutual influences the socio-historical and the cinematic sphere have on one another, namely the way in which cinema has contributed to the promotion of gay causes in Israel, and the way in which gay concerns have enriched Israeli films both visually and thematically.

From its very early stages, my project has corresponded to a remarkable revival of Israeli cinema in international markets. The worldwide success of numerous recent films, a few of which are gay films, and the ever-growing interest in the work of young filmmakers on the international film festival circuit (the majority of the films analysed in Chapter 5 have been shown in festivals around the world), prove that Israel can be a source of cultural interest beyond its contentious politics.¹ The expanding discussion of Israeli cinema in general, demonstrated also by a growing number of books on the subject published in the last decade, suggests that the medium might now serve alongside Hebrew literature as a major expressive tool of a torn and polarized society.

My work is indebted to the increasing scholarly interest in Israeli cinema in the last two decades. Ella Shohat's now canonical *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989) marked the beginning of this scholarship. A series of essays and books published in the 1990s and 2000s have widened and elaborated Shohat's seminal project. These include Judd Ne'eman's "The Empty Tomb in the Postmodern Pyramid: Israeli Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s" (1995), Orly Lubin, Nurith Gertz and Judd Ne'eman's edited volume *Fictive Looks: On Israeli Cinema* (in Hebrew, 1998), Yosefa Loshitzky's *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (2001), Raz Yosef's *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (2004), and Nurith Gertz's *Holocaust Survivors, Aliens and Others in Israeli Cinema and Literature* (in Hebrew, 2004). These works have critically explored the ways in which Israeli

¹ *Late Marriage* (Chatuna Meucheret, Dover Koshashvili, 2001), *Yossi and Jagger* (Eytan Fox, 2002), *Broken Wings* (K'nafayim Shvurot, Nir Bergman, 2003) and *Walk on Water* (Lalechet Al Hamayim, Eytan Fox, 2004) are just some of the films that have garnered international critical and commercial acclaim since the beginning of the decade.

cinema has redefined alternatives to the artificially unified Israeli collective identity.

As the first scholar to offer a comprehensive study of Israeli filmmaking and its role in constructing Israeli nationality, Ella Shohat had to map a whole new field of study. Her book was a groundbreaking piece of work, and some of the fundamental arguments in it are treated almost as axiomatic today. For example, the inherent inequality of Oriental Jews in Israeli society, and the Zionist movement as an extension of European colonialism are well-rehearsed concepts. However, the array of voices in contemporary Israeli culture, reflecting a fragmented society, requires further investigation and specification. Shohat's followers have been encouraged to look more closely at specific aspects of Israeli cinema. Of the many books and articles published on Israeli cinema in the past decade, Yosef's *Beyond Flesh* is perhaps the closest to my object of study. At the same time, there are some fundamental differences between my project and Yosef's, namely my focus on gay cinema rather than representations of masculinities in all areas of Israeli society.

Drawing on Yosefa Loshitzky's discussion of racism and sexuality in Israeli culture (*Identity Politics*), Raz Yosef identifies an unexplored aspect of Israeli cinema: its role in the construction of masculinity and queerness in a militaristic, heterosexist society that was founded on the myth of the Sabra, the new "Muscle Jew" of Palestine. Rather than focusing on the booming gay Israeli cinema of the last decade, Yosef's work provides a subversive textual reading that aims to liberate the "repressed queer" Jew in what are generally regarded as canonical or at least mainstream cinematic texts, culled from different genres and eras. In his research he encompasses propagandistic pre-state Zionist films, military films of the 1970s and 1980s, and "queer films" of the 1990s. Although the last chapter of his book deals with the work of self-proclaimed gay directors, it is by no means the book's main concern. As Yosef describes his study in the introduction, in most of the films he analyses "there are no ostensibly gay characters", and "the word 'gay' is not even mentioned in any form or context" (*Beyond Flesh* 5).

I have chosen to begin this study where Yosef ends his, namely the emergence of proclaimed cinematic representations of gayness. Unlike previous projects, this thesis focuses on films that seek, mostly, to undermine Israeli

dominant national-masculine discourse in order to allow diverse sexual codes and practices to reveal themselves. Unlike Yosef's discussion of the films, mine looks predominantly at the text rather than the subtext. I seek to take apart the texts of gay cinema in order to look at their different components. I intend to do that by tracing the historical and socio-cultural conditions that were involved in the films' conception and production, the different political agendas that they choose to embrace, and the influence they have had on the development of Israeli gay culture and society.

As far as methods are concerned, my research has combined close analysis of individual film texts with theoretical discussions drawing on feminism and postcolonial theory to analyse issues concerning marginality and its subversion, and on queer theory to discuss the ongoing destabilization inherent in gay identity politics. In my textual analyses I have aimed to draw attention to the interplay between the overt thematic level of the films (story, plot, character, motivation etc.) and their various formal elements (*mise-en-scène*, lighting, music and costume). I have also sought to relate the films to the cultural and political history of Israel since the late 1970s. Beyond textual analysis, the discussion reaches towards the institutional apparatuses involved in the cinema industry, which includes the political decision-making concerning allocation of funding, censorship and television broadcasting.

This thesis revolves around thematic principles in order to provide a coherent picture of the various phases that Israeli gay cinema, and gay culture, has gone through since the late 1970s. Although the study of these phases implies the tracing of a historical development, the thesis is not a comprehensive chronicle of gay cinema in Israel. Whilst I have endeavored to include as many films as possible, I have not taken account of every Israeli film in which there is a gay or a homosexual reference. Rather, I have chosen films which are either symptomatic or initiators of certain advances, trajectories and discursive practices in Israeli gay society and cultural production. My approach is intertextual in that it is interested in the relation between different cinematic (and at times literary or journalistic) texts, whether they are Israeli or foreign.

By studying the role of film in the rise of the gay movement in Israel, I aim to offer a possible definition of gay cinema. This vexed term does not designate a specific genre. As this study demonstrates, a gay film can be a fiction

or a non-fiction film. It can be a drama, a comedy, or a thriller. Or it can be none of the above. It can adhere to a strict set of generic conventions or defy them. It can be made by a self-proclaimed gay director or by a heterosexual one. For the purpose of this particular project, a gay film does not necessarily have to be gay-themed at all: a few of the films which are discussed in the following chapters do not directly address gay concerns, but they were made by publicly open gay filmmakers, whose well-publicized sexual preference and lifestyle call for, or at least enable, a gay reading of their supposedly non-gay films, as in the case of Eytan Fox's *Song of the Siren* (*Shirat Hasirena*, 1994), which is analysed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, at least two films – *Tel Aviv Stories* (*Sipurei Tel Aviv*, Nirit Yaron and Ayelet Menahemy, 1992) and *Life According to Agfa* (*Hachayim Al Pi Agfa*, Assi Dayan, 1992), also discussed in Chapter 2 – are neither gay-themed nor made by openly gay filmmakers. I have chosen to include *Tel Aviv Stories*, however, as I believe it played an important role in expanding the boundaries of Israeli discourse around wider matters of sexuality and gender at the time of its release, thus contributing, indirectly, to the burgeoning Israeli gay discourse in the early 1990s. I have chosen to include *Life According to Agfa* because it illustrates a central point that I make in the chapter, namely the emphasis on Tel Aviv as a site where normative identifications with the state are contested. In so doing, the film responded at the time of its release to shifts within Israeli society, which had influenced, like *Tel Aviv Stories*, the Israeli gay discourse.

The concept of a gay community, to which I refer in several instances in the text, is probably as difficult to circumscribe as the term “gay cinema”. It has been noted that the Israeli gay and lesbian community is an “amorphous entity” (Walzer x). One of the main objectives of this project is to point to the diversity of gay, lesbian, transgender and queer experiences and practices in Israel, which has inevitably raised different perceptions of who exactly is represented by the “community” and, more crucially, what constitutes a community in the first place. Challenging common notions of gay community and identity based on a narrow definition of the somatic, and on one's sexuality, Ed Cohen states:

although the assumption that ‘we’ constitute a ‘natural’ community because we share a sexual identity might appear to offer a stable basis for

group formations, my experience suggests that it can just as often interrupt the process of creating intellectual and political projects which can gather 'us' together across time and space. By predicating 'our' affinity upon the assertion of a common 'sexuality,' we tacitly agree to leave unexplored any 'internal' contradictions which undermine the coherence we desire from the imagined certainty of an unassailable commonality or of incontestable sexuality. (72)

Rather than suggesting that there is a single Israeli gay community, I aim to show the complexity of this idea. The films I have chosen to include in this study demonstrate well cases where the different branches of the imagined gay community (borrowing the term from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*) come together, as well as cases in which they split, and, at times, even clash. For the most part, the use of the term "community" in the context of gay life in Israel implies an aspiration for a unified community or an image of one, propelled by the media, and especially by a few prominent figures, highly visible gay men and lesbians who have become unofficial spokespersons on gay issues. In some cases it refers to public institutions that were founded to represent gay men and lesbians. One such institution is *Agudah* ("society" or "association" in Hebrew). *Agudah* was established as the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights (SPPR) in 1975 by a group of men in order to provide a support network for gay men and lesbians (Kama, "From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*" 142). As Amir Sumaka'i Fink and Jacob Press show (369), the organization's agenda has shifted and changed since its establishment, reflecting the shifting boundaries of inclusion or perhaps corresponding to changes in awareness. Alterations of its title have illustrated these ideological and political shifts. In 1988, after Israel's dormant anti-sodomy law was repealed, it added the phrase "for Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in Israel" to its title. The title was changed yet again in 1995 to the Association of Gay Men, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in Israel; in 1999 "Transgendered People" was also added. The organization is simply called *Agudah* by gay men, lesbians and transsexuals.

Some of the films I discuss in the thesis make a point of exploring, and questioning the cultural, social and geographical boundaries of the Israeli gay community – that is, the ideal of a unified community, envisioned by *Agudah* – by portraying the life of those who cross them, among them Mizrahi, Arab-Israeli

gay men, lesbians, those who live outside urban centers and those who work in the sex industry.

One last linguistic note on the words “gay”, “homosexual” and “queer”, which some writers use interchangeably, adding to the confusion they may create. I have used the term “gay” to refer to self-professed male or female gay people, and to films that have been marketed or introduced to the public as gay-themed films. The word “homosexual” is often used in place of “gay”. However, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s observation, I have chosen to use the term “gay” “since it is the explicit choice of a large number of the people to whom it refers” (16). As Sedgwick points out, the word “homosexual” risks anachronism, and sounds “diagnostic” (16).

Unlike “homosexual”, “gay” implies the formation of identity (and subsequently, culture), which, although based on sexual preference, is constructed as a much more complex weave of human traits. Gay identity can be limiting but also empowering: it is through the construction of a gay identity and society that oppressive practices in the area of sexuality and sexual choice can be challenged.

Although the term homosexuality has been in use since the nineteenth century, modern gay identity as it is known and practiced today is a relatively modern invention and a Western concept. It is not only gay-identified men and women who practice homosexual sex. Homosexual encounters had taken place for centuries without the men and women involved defining themselves as gay or lesbian.² Rather, gay men and lesbians’ sexual practice have served as a cornerstone upon which different hypotheses regarding the common traits and political objectives they must share have been developed.

The formation of gay identity is part of a greater, modern tendency to categorize people in relation to their sexuality. In *The Will To Knowledge: The History of Sexuality (Vol. 1)*, Foucault claims: “[t]he nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology [...] The sodomite had been a

² In his essay on San Francisco’s homosexual politics, for instance, Les Wright identifies a moment in which neither the men who had sex with other men nor the nature of their sexual activity were considered “homosexual”. Wright writes: “[t]he Phallo-centric sexual economy of Gold Rush era San Francisco suggests that we distinguish between penetrative-masculine and receptive-feminine roles in male-male sexual encounters, and that sexual adventurism carried very different meanings to practitioners of the time than they do in American society today” (165).

temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Foucault discusses the invention of the homosexual as a noun, and the creation of a homosexual type of human being, fixed in a web of discourses. Focusing on different sexualities as practices, David M. Halperin, following Foucault, has emphasized their shifts throughout history. He has argued:

the study of sexual life in antiquity reveals homosexuality, heterosexuality, and even sexuality itself to be relatively recent and highly culture-specific forms of erotic life – not the basic building-blocks of sexual identity for all human beings in all times and places, but peculiar and indeed exceptional ways of conceptualizing as well as *experiencing* sexual desire. (9)

I have used the term “queer” throughout the thesis to refer to people and films that take a defiant stance regarding the culturally constructed straight-gay dichotomy. Queer culture attempts to embrace notions of fluidity and flexibility in order to negate the fixed and seemingly stable categories of sexual identities. Queer ideology defies an essentialist approach to sexualities, and claims that they are in a constant state of being formed and deconstructed. It refuses any possibility of regularity, and provokes and repudiates any attempt at rigid conceptualization. As Moe Meyer claims, “[t]he reappropriation of the once derogatory term ‘queer,’ and its contemporary use as an affirmative self-nominated identity label, is far from clear in its current applications” (2). Lee Edelman goes further by arguing that “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (*No Future* 17). In applying queer approaches to cultural production, Mark W. Turner has argued that they “seek less to define a specific and agreed upon historical narrative than to offer possible, contingent ways of reading the past in order to engage with the present in ways that do not rely on normative ideas and behaviours” (45-46).

At the same time, as Leo Bersani has argued, queerness may prevent the formation of a solid gay identity and community, both of which have been highly significant for homosexuals in their battle for rights and recognition. Referring to the gay movement in America, Bersani writes: “[i]t would be foolish and unjust to deny that the quality of life for gay men and women in America has markedly improved precisely because a politicized gay and lesbian community does exist”

(*Homos* 52-53). For Bersani, queerness is no more than a new discursive category, but one which denies its unique (homo)sexual referent. He writes:

[o]ur de-gaying resources seem limitless. Most recently, we have decided to be queer rather than gay. The history of *gay* is too bound up with efforts to define a homosexual identity. But *queer* has a double advantage: it repeats, with pride, a pejorative straight word for homosexual even as it unloads the term's homosexual referent. For oppressed groups to accept the queer label is to identify themselves as being actively at odds with a male-dominated, white, capitalistic, heterosexist culture. Gay becomes one aspect in Michael Warner's "resistance to regimes of the normal." This generous definition puts all resisters in the same queer bag – a universalizing move I appreciate but that fails to specify the sexual distinctiveness of the resistance. (*Homos* 71)

Influenced by Bersani, other scholars of gay and lesbian studies have pointed to the flaws of "queer". Eric Savoy, for instance, argues that "[i]t is precisely this ease of appropriation, combined with the queer project's destabilizations of 'coherence' and the refusal of the term itself to settle definitively, that has occasioned so much uneasiness for lesbian- and gay-centered scholarship and the consequent dialogics of reproach" (154). In discussing either "queer" or "gay" approaches in relation to certain films, filmmakers and movements, I hope to have shed some light on the different political, social, and cultural agendas they stand for.

In the first section of this introductory chapter, I aim to offer a succinct overview of the Israeli gay movement and representations of homosexuality (mainly male homosexuality) in Israeli films prior to the release of Amos Guttman's first feature film *Drifting* in 1983. For reason which I shall explain below and more extensively in Chapter 3, I see Guttman's cinema as the first comprehensive cultural attempt to define gay identity in Israel. Guttman envisaged his films as links in a bigger project, whose main objective was to create a cultural space in which new identities would appear.

The second part of this chapter will offer a brief history of the Zionist concept of the new Jew of Palestine (or the Muscle Jew), which was the blueprint for Israeli masculinity after 1948. Serving as the model against which most gay men have had to define themselves either through resistance or assimilation, and a focal point of reference in almost all of the films discussed in the thesis, it is

important to understand the social and cultural reasons that have brought it about. I am indebted to scholars Daniel Boyarin, George L. Mosse, Sander L. Gilman, David Biale and Michael Gluzman, among others, whose seminal work on the complex relation between Judaism and sexuality has inspired my own interest in the subject.

In the third and last part of this introductory chapter I will delineate the structure of the thesis, introduce each of the four chapters that follow it and point to the connections that I believe may be made between them. Throughout the introduction I hope to situate the project within the various scholarly fields on which it draws.

The Emergence of the Israeli Gay Movement and its Representations on the Screen

The gay movement in Israel has gone through dramatic changes over the years. It has moved from a militant, uncompromising position to become a significant social, cultural and political player in the public arena. However, recent years have seen the gay movement, and indeed filmmaking, going back to its belligerent roots, bringing to the fore problematic topics that had previously been avoided beforehand such as the occupation and its impact on interracial gay couples, the relation between gayness and institutional religion, and male prostitution.

As in other countries the gay revolution in Israel was inspired and shaped by the gay rights movement in the US, ignited in the 1960s as part of the broader civil rights movement. However, the prominence of gay identity is no longer unique to the US. These ideas have now long been exported around the globe, to non-Western as well as Western, cultures. Dennis Altman has argued that what was first considered to be a local phenomenon in the US has turned out to be, since the late 1960s, an international movement that encompasses people of different national, racial and religious backgrounds. As Altman points out,

in the past two decades there has emerged an identifiable group of self-identified homosexuals – to date many more men than women – who see themselves as part of a global community, whose commonalities override but do not deny those of race and nationality [...] globalization, in both its

cultural and economic manifestations, impinges on the very creation and experience of sexual behavior and identities. (7-8)

This tendency, obviously, is not without its risks, as Altman observes: “American ‘queer theory’ remains as relentlessly Atlantic-centric in its view of the world as the mainstream culture it critiques” (3).

A long time had passed before Israeli society saw its own gay rights movement take shape. As Altman claims, the gay movement of North America had a more widespread, immediate influence on similar movements in Europe and Australia, since there “the largely American symbols could be made relevant to local conditions” (Altman 3).³ Despite the widespread aspiration of Israeli society to follow European-Western societies, the prominence of the military and related heteronormative values blocked the chance for the emergence of gay identity and community at an earlier stage and in tandem with the American civil rights movement. According to Sami Shalom Chetrit, while the civil rights movement in the US and the 1968 student riots in Paris were taking place, Israel was still in a euphoric state following its victory in the 1967 Six Day War (137). The opposition to the Vietnam War in the US was replaced in Israel with a celebration and corroboration of its heteronormative and militaristic character.

The early 1970s saw the beginning of social rebellion. Feminism,⁴ the Israeli Black Panthers movement, which fought state discrimination against the Mizrahi community, and the rise of gay consciousness, all took place around that time, and were influenced by similar trends in the US and the West. In the case of the Black Panthers, the members of the movement went as far as adopting the name of the American black organization that inspired them.⁵ The emergence of these new movements was a result of opposite forces: they came both to threaten the hegemony of the ruling political elites and to confirm Israel’s “liberal” and

³ It is important to note though that in some Western European countries, such as France, there was not always an agreement regarding the necessity of forming a gay community. As Michael D. Sibalís claims, “[c]ritics argue that such initiatives are quintessentially American and insist that any talk of a ‘gay community’ in France smacks of American-style ‘identity politics.’ They portray the United States as a mosaic of competing minorities, each affirming its own identity and lobbying for its own special interests [...] This runs counter to France’s so-called ‘republican tradition’” (35).

⁴ As Esther Fuchs argues, “the Yom Kippur War of 1973 inspired the contemporary phase of the feminist movement in Israel” (3).

⁵ As G.N. Giladi argues, the Israeli Black Panthers adopted this name “because they believed that there was no fundamental difference between anti-black discrimination in the United States and anti-Sephardi discrimination in Israel” (254).

“Westernized” disposition. Up to this day, the emergence of a self-defined gay community is directly linked to Israeli society’s effort to assimilate itself to Western values. According to Fink and Press,

[o]ne of the most central themes of modern Israeli life [...] is this all-important struggle for self-assertion as a ‘normal’ Western society [...] It is this deep-rooted allegiance to what is perceived as Western that accounts for the current civil status of the category of person referred to in formal Hebrew as a ‘*homoseqsu’al*’, and informally as a ‘*homo*’. (9)

Although late to arrive, gay consciousness has been on the rise since the mid-1970s, gradually lifting the legal restrictions that the state had imposed on its gay citizens for many years. The changing representations of gay men and lesbians in the media and the frequent references to them in popular culture led to a legal revolution, which took place mostly between 1988 and 1993 (starting with the decriminalization of sodomy), and secured gay men and women an almost equal standing in society.⁶ Following these far-reaching changes the 1990s were, in the words of Aeyal M. Gross, “Israel’s ‘gay decade’” (391).

Even though, at first, the gay movement had certain elements of queer resistance by opposing the heterosexist, militaristic values Israeli society was based upon, they gradually vanished from its agenda. Instead, members of the gay community have internalized these heterosexist norms, hoping for social acceptance rather than social change, and allied themselves with the fading Ashkenazi elite that stood behind them. The establishment’s acceptance of the gay community resulted from an understanding that, in the current state of affairs, a minor sexual “deviation” was less threatening than the danger presented by other minority groups that have gradually gained political power over the last couple of decades, among them Orthodox Jews.

The community’s “integrationist” approach (Walzer 250), discussed in Chapter 2, has preempted fears that other minorities often evoke, for example, Russian immigrants (who have established their own education and media networks), and the ultra-Orthodox community. Referring to the latter, Lee Walzer has argued that “[i]t was one thing when the ultra-Orthodox wanted state support

⁶ I will discuss changes in legalization in the chapters in relation to specific films. For an exhaustive discussion of the history of the gay movement in Israel and its legal battles see the introductions to Fink & Press, and Walzer.

to maintain their unique way of life within their own communities. It is quite another when that same population demands imposing its way on the rest of the nation” (253). For the most part, unlike the common perception of other “separatist” groups in Israel, the gay community has wished to be seen as part of “the rest of the nation” rather than to impose “its way”.

In terms of visibility and legalization, the gay community has acquired a stable place in hegemonic Israel. However, some of the oppressive practices in Israeli mainstream society have been endorsed by the gay community, as part of its quest to produce a clean-cut, wholesome picture of homosexual life. Thus, most of the representations of gay men focus on a limited gay experience, namely that of a middle class, Ashkenazi (read in Israel as “white”), urban man. Ignoring large groups within the community, such as lesbians, transsexuals and Mizrahi gay men, and turning its back on burning issues, like the AIDS epidemic, the gay community has created a homogenized, exclusionist model of gay life. As Alan Sinfield argues: “every identity is an exclusion as well as an inclusion. For those who have felt themselves to be interested in same-sex passion but somewhat to one side of the metropolitan identities, *gay has been a constraint*” (7, Sinfield’s emphasis).

References to homosexuality and gay culture had been part of Israeli films long before the first acclaimed gay filmmaker Amos Guttman completed his first feature film *Drifting* in 1983. The first overt mentions of homosexuality can be found in Israeli films of the early 1970s. Most of these films are popular comedies, which offer a grotesque portrayal of homosexuality. Homosexuality in these films is mostly used as a narrative ornamentation, a device for extorting laughs, and has very little role, if any, in moving the plot forward.

One of the first films to feature a gay character was George Ovadia’s *They Call Me Shmil* (*Kor’yim Li Shmil*, 1973), a riotous comedy in which homosexuality is portrayed in a stereotypical manner by a marginal character in very few scenes. In Assi Dayan’s *Fine Trouble* (*Eize Yofi Shel Tsarot*, 1976), a film that resembles Ovadia’s film not only in its use of certain generic formulas but also in the director’s choice of cast, one of the characters is an Italian hairdresser (Moshe Ish Kassit), who does not speak Hebrew. Made in the mid-1970s, the filmmakers suggest homosexuality, hinted at in the character’s feminine gestures and in his overt interest in male customers, cannot speak

Hebrew and hence cannot be contained within the boundaries of the Israeli discourse. The film also features Ze'ev Revach, a famous actor and comedian of Mizrahi origin, as the owner of the beauty salon where the Italian hairdresser works. The proclaimed heterosexuality of Revach's flamboyant character is merely suggested, never proven. Practicing exaggerated feminine gestures, and dressed in brightly coloured clothes (in one of the scenes he appears in full drag, following the lead of a similar drag scene in *Snooker* [*Chagiga Ba'Snooker*, Boaz Davidzon, 1975]), Revach's character embodies what was considered a demonstration of sexual otherness in 1970s Israel. Throughout the film he is seen trying to avoid the sexual favours his wealthy female clients try to confer on him. He eventually falls in love with Ofra (Yona Elia), the female protagonist, but their subsequent wedding is only discussed, not shown. The fact that his heterosexuality is never practiced suggests he is actually a homosexual in disguise.

The late 1970s see another gay character in Avi Nesher's *The Troupe* (*Halaha*, 1978), which instantly became a huge commercial and critical success. The film depicts the behind-the-scenes activities of an army troupe, travelling the country after the 1967 War. Benny, the gay member (Menachem Eini) confesses his homosexuality during a game of Truth or Dare. The alleged liberal stance of the film is undermined by the fact that the gay soldier is the least developed character in the script. Very little is said about or by him, and unlike his heterosexual counterparts, who are fully engaged in complex romantic relationships, he seems to lack a personal life (a gay relationship is hinted at in the film, but is never seen or spoken of).

Ze'ev Revach's portrayal of a pseudo-homosexual character in *Fine Trouble* is further developed in *The Hairdresser* (*Sapar Nashim*, 1984), which he also co-wrote and directed.⁷ Following the tradition of the "comedy of errors" (in films such as *He Who Steals from a Thief Is Not Guilty* [*Gonev miGanav Patur*, Ze'ev Revach, 1977], *Kuni Lemel in Tel Aviv* [Yoel Zilberg, 1978] and *The Aunt from Argentina* [*HaDoda meArgentina*, George Ovadia, 1983]) Revach plays the dual role of estranged twin brothers: Michel is a successful, wealthy gay hairdresser while Victor is a poor cleaner, married and a father of seven. Having

⁷ In 1998 Revach wrote and directed *Double Bouskilla* (*Pa'amaim Buskilla*) which, with an almost identical plot line, can be read as an updated version of *Sapar Nashim*.

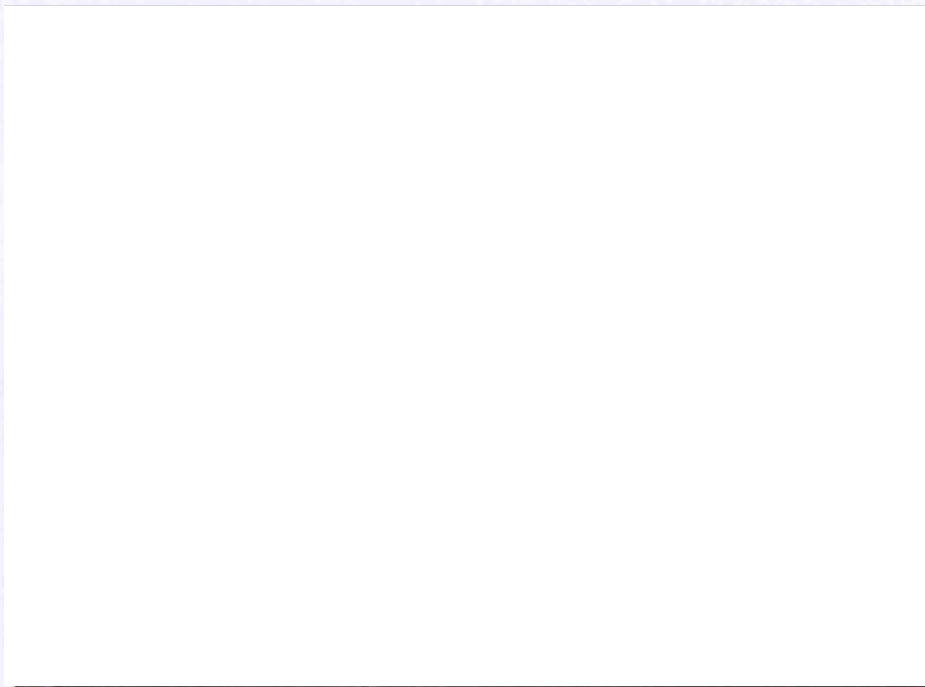


Fig. 1.1 Ze'ev Revach in the double role of Michel and Victor in *The Hairdresser*. DVD capture.



Fig. 1.2 Outside the Israeli discourse. The Italian hairdresser (Moshe Ish Kassit) in *Fine Trouble*. DVD capture.

stolen money from the safe at his workplace, Victor contacts his brother, who suggests they switch roles: Michel will pass as a married heterosexual man, while Victor will pretend to be a gay man, so that the police will not be able to match the fingerprints left on the safe with those of Victor. As in previous films, by employing exaggerated body language and effeminate gestures, Revach's Michel represents the stereotypical image of gay men. At the same time, Michel is portrayed as a successful, savvy professional, whose bright idea saves his brother from imprisonment. Furthermore, his lavish lifestyle is a source of envy for his heterosexual brother. Indeed, it is Victor and his wife who join Michel's business at the end of the film. Victor, who had rejected his gay brother to the point of denial (his wife and children did not even know he had a brother), now embraces both him and his desirable life. The film offers a subversive view of gayness, by resisting the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy and demonstrating how the two constantly overlap: Michel is Victor, Victor is Michel, and the two are Ze'ev Revach. In the film, Revach is constantly being made and remade according to circumstances, his identity becoming increasingly unstable and dependent on semantic confusion. Raz Yosef sees Revach's performance as mimicry: "[m]imicking his straight brother and being gay himself, Michelle (sic) embodies seemingly contradictory notions of sexual and gender identity: male or female, homosexual or heterosexual. He inhabits an apparently impossible threshold between sexes and genders and represents a bodily anomaly" (*Beyond Flesh* 115).

It is interesting to note that these early representations of different types of masculinity are located in the context of Jewish Oriental rather than Ashkenazi masculinity. *Fine Trouble* and *Snooker*, for example, were released shortly after Uri Zohar's *Peeping Toms (Metzitzim, 1972)* and *Big Eyes (Eynayeem G'dolot, 1974)*, which celebrated the antics of sex-crazed heterosexual Ashkenazi men. One of the Zionist movement's main objectives was to create a new virile Jewish man. The idea was to transform the old Jew of the European Diaspora into a "Muscle Jew" and a native of Palestine. Mizrahi men could never fully become part of this project because of their different ethnic origin. Their difference was marked by hegemonic (Ashkenazi) culture not only in relation to their different "racial" attributes, but also in relation to their sexuality: Mizrahi men were suspected either of hyper-sexuality and overproduction, or of homosexuality (Yosef, *Beyond Flesh* 87-89). In order to expose the artificially constructed ideal

of the Zionist body, Mizrahi men embraced the discriminative approaches practiced against them. They were the first to transgress the rigid boundaries of Zionist-Israeli masculinity, and cultural categories in general on the screen and beyond.⁸

The grotesque portrayal of gay men offered by Ze'ev Revach forms part of the quest to explore ways to undermine the foundations of hegemonic Ashkenazi masculinity. Stereotypical as they were, Revach's performances in his 1970s and 1980s films took homosexuality and the need for creating a gay space and identity more seriously than other, allegedly more respectable, cinematic attempts to do so in films such as *The Troupe*, Dan Wolman's *Hide and Seek (Machbo'im, 1980)*, and Shimon Dotan's *Repeat Dive (Tslila Chozeret, 1982)*. *Hide and Seek* takes place in 1946 Jerusalem, during the British Mandate. It was the first dramatic film to make a direct reference to a male-male relationship. In the film, Balaban (Doron Tavori), the young schoolteacher protagonist is caught by members of the *Haganah* – one of the pre-state armed Jewish underground organizations – having an affair with an Arab man. This is seen as an act of treason, for which he and his lover are punished. Though homosexuality is a key dramatic element in *Hide and Seek*, it is not discussed in itself: the spectators find out about the protagonist's love affair, and indeed homosexuality, only towards the end of the film and the Arab lover remains nameless. Rather, it is an expression of a "sexual entanglement with the Arab enemy" (Yosef, *Beyond Flesh* 133).

The theme of biracial sexual entanglement is developed further in Dan Wachsman's 1982 film *Hamsin*. The homoerotic feelings hinted at between Gedalia (Shlomo Tarshish), the Jewish protagonist, and Khaled (Yassin Shoaf), his Arab employee and friend, and the complex feelings of envy and anxiety evoked in him by the sexual relationship between the Arab man and his (the Jewish protagonist's) sister, Hava (Hemda Levi), lead to a fatal ending. By killing

⁸ It is little wonder that Dana International, probably the most famous Israeli transsexual, who won the Eurovision Song Contest for Israel in 1998, is of a Yemenite origin, a fact that was stressed in the vast marketing machine formed around her, and in her choice of repertoire. As her stage name (Dana was born Yaron Cohen) and life story suggest, Dana has been continuously breaking barriers. She has built her career by boldly crossing gender, ethnic, national and sexual lines, constantly deconstructing categories and binaries. While she has identified herself with many of these categories, she has committed herself to none. Shortly after her victory she declared, "I represent gays and lesbians from all over the world [...] I represent the regular Israelis, all the Arabs, the Christians [...] Everyone who wants to be represented by me" (quoted by Fink & Press 14).

the Arab man, the Jewish protagonist attempts both to disrupt the forbidden (heterosexual) biracial relationship and cleanse himself of his homosexual desire.

Homosexual desire is suggested but never consummated in *Repeat Dive*. The protagonist, Yoav (Doron Neshet) is a diver in the Israeli navy commando. His best friend Yochi dies in a military operation. When a fellow soldier notes after the funeral that Yochi spent more time with Yoav than with his wife, Mira (Liron Nirgad), Yoav replies: "Yes, but we don't date anymore". This emphasizes the close relationship the two men had. In his will, Yochi "leaves" Mira to Yoav. Mira then becomes a "mediating" object between the two men. The death of Yochi and the subsequent wedding of Yoav and Mira imply that homosexuality can only exist in the realm of fantasy. It is not surprising that some unequivocal homoerotic gestures, like a kiss between Yoav and one of the soldiers, for example, occur during a party they have in a pub after the funeral of Yochi. Only when drunk, that is when they step outside the realm of rationality, can these manly, brave soldiers express their most hidden desires.

The 1980s saw the first earnest attempts to produce films that did not merely mention homosexuality or use it as a motif in the narrative but rather presented it as their focal theme. These films, in so doing, contributed to the construction of an Israeli gay identity. One such film is the short drama *A Different Shadow* (*Tsel Acher*, 1983).⁹ The film, directed by then unknown filmmaker Ron Asulin, tells the story of a young gay man (Danny Rot) who falls in and out of love with another man (Daniel Amar). He comes out to his family, who react badly to their son's news. The broadcast of the film, which was commissioned by the state TV channel, was eventually banned because of its subject matter.

Like *A Different Shadow*, Amos Guttman's first short film *Drifting* (*Nagua*, 1976) was banned by Israeli TV. Whereas Asulin has not made another gay film,¹⁰ Guttman dedicated most of his cinematic career to addressing this theme until his death of AIDS-related illness in 1993. In 1983 he completed the

⁹ From which this thesis takes its title. The title also alludes to *Different from the Others* (*Anders als die Anderen*, Richard Oswald, Germany, 1919), which is regarded as one of the first gay-themed films ever made. The film was banned at the time of its release and was later burned by the Nazis.

¹⁰ Asulin has since become a successful director of commercials and political broadcasts for election campaigns. In a conversation with me in March 2005 he claimed he did not have a copy of *A Different Shadow*. No copies of the film have been preserved in the state TV archive either.

feature version of *Drifting*, a film that has since become a landmark for gay cultural production in Israel. In Guttman's cinema, homosexuality and gay identity are finally foregrounded as a major theme. In a series of shorts and feature films, Guttman has captured the marginality of people who live and die outside the boundaries of the Zionist-Israeli discourse. Guttman has earned his pioneering status not only for his films' thematic shift from committed and nationalist topics to socially challenging ones, but also for their innovative hyper-realistic aesthetics. The films' stylistic excesses reveal the ideological fissures that other "nationalist" films seek to conceal.

The late 1970s and 1980s were also the years in which the first overt lesbian references were made in Israeli films. In *Weekend Circles* (*Ma'agalim Shel Shishi-Shabat*, Idit Shechori, 1980), for instance, Lior (Galit Roitman-Gil), one of the four protagonists, is openly lesbian, and the subject is brought up and discussed by the four throughout the film. They do so while exploring the bustling nightlife of Tel Aviv during one long weekend, moving from a rock concert to a party to a late-night swim in the sea, consuming alcohol and drugs. Their surroundings, it is implied, encourage their sexual liberation and openness to same-sex experiences. It is important to note, though, that *Weekend Circles* is an exception. Apart from suggestive scenes in a few films produced before and after it, Shechori's film remained an isolated attempt to portray lesbianism on the Israeli screen until the beginning of this decade. The majority of the new lesbian films are documentaries. *Soon*, a short lesbian-themed fiction film by Joelle Alexis and Sigal Yehuda, was released in 2005.

Brief references to lesbianism are included in films such as *Dizengof 99* (Avi Nesher, 1979), *Big Girl* (*Yalda G'dola*, Nirit Yaron, 1987), *The Last Winter* (*Ha'Choref Ha'Acharon*, Riki Shelach Nissimoff, 1983) and *Moments* (*Re'gayim*, Michal Bat-Adam, 1979). In both *Dizengof 99* and *Moments* the interfemale intimacy occurs only in the presence of another man, as part of an orgy. Orly Lubin has argued that *Moments* "does not offer any (lesbian) alternatives – the ultimate connection between the two women is achieved by means of the male organ: the movement of the phallus from one woman to the other. Only the phallus, we are being told, has the power to constitute female and interfemale sexuality" (301). Similarly, intimacy between the two heterosexual female protagonists, Israeli Maya (Yona Elia) and American Joyce (Kathleen Quinlan),

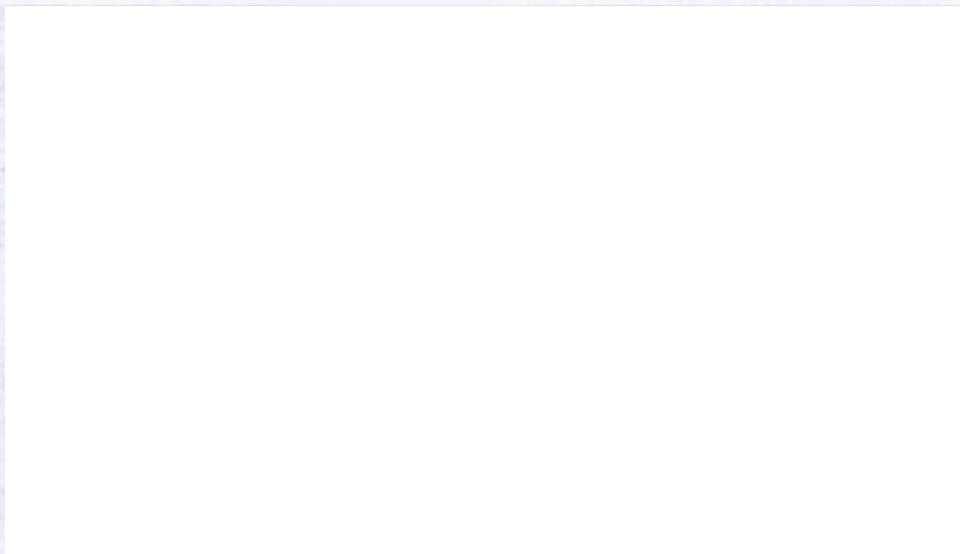


Fig. 1.3 *Weekend Circles*. An isolated attempt to portray lesbianism until the beginning of this decade. Reproduced from Meir Schnitzer, *Israeli Cinema: Facts/Plots/Directors/Opinions* (1994).

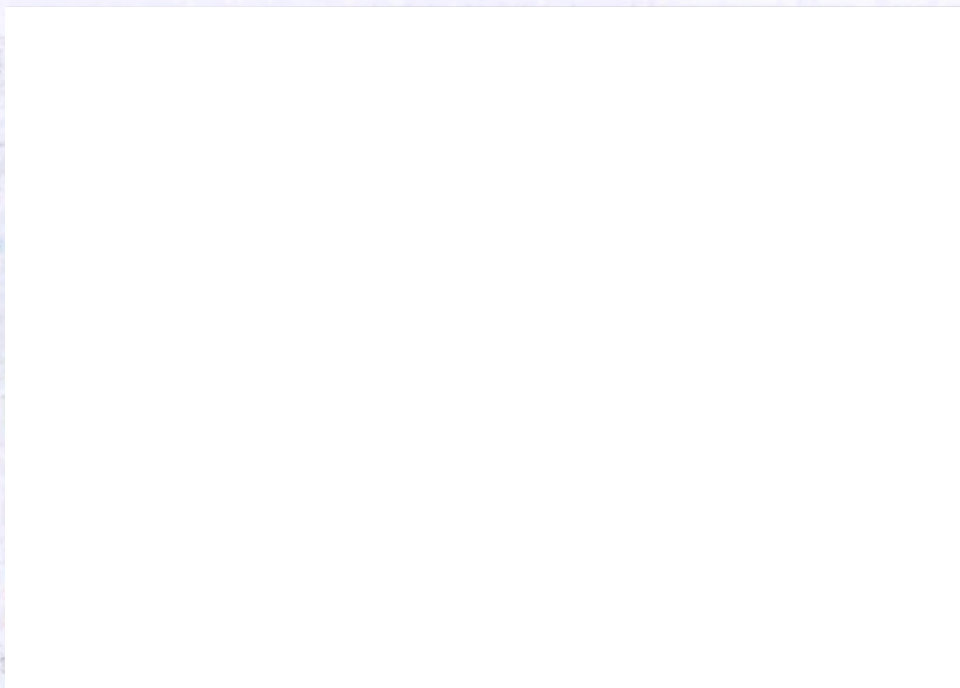


Fig. 1.4 Mediated love. Joyce (Kathleen Quinlan, left) and Maya (Yona Elian) in *The Last Winter*. Reproduced from Schnitzer.

in *The Last Winter* is mediated through men, and only made possible by their absence. The two women meet at the information centre for families of Israeli POWs during the 1973 war. In the course of several weeks, while waiting for information regarding their husbands' fate, they get closer, and even physically intimate. Towards the end of the film, Joyce reunites with her husband, Eddie (Stephen Macht), whereas Maya finds out that her spouse is dead. By suggesting that her husband will have sexual intercourse with her widowed friend, Joyce establishes a contact, physical and emotional, with Maya, a contact she could not have made otherwise. Shortly after Joyce and her family return to America, Maya writes a letter to Joyce, in which she expresses her love and longing for her.

The 1990s were the years in which a significant progress in the legal and social status of gay men and lesbians was finally achieved. It was also the decade in which certain sectors of the gay community became closer than ever to the Ashkenazi hegemonic elite. This rapprochement and the wish for total integration into mainstream Israeli culture are encouraged and celebrated in the films of established gay filmmaker Eytan Fox. His two recent mainstream films, *Yossi and Jagger* (2002) and *Walk on Water* (*Lalechet Al Hamayim*, 2004), avoid posing difficult questions but rather aim at the status quo. Unlike Guttman's, Fox's films manifest the current social status the gay community has achieved for itself: gayness is perceived as a legitimate way of life, and even desirable, as long as it does not transgress the rigid boundaries of Israeli hegemonic culture. Emphasizing the sameness of the community's members and everybody else, the meaning of gay identity in contemporary Israel, as it is depicted in those films, has been reduced to a mere different sexual orientation. Fox's films are more about men who happen to be homosexuals than about men who lead a *gay* life, which is, by definition, a deviation from the norm.

However, a few of the new, less established filmmakers who have emerged in the past few years have a different vision to Fox's. Their films, mostly documentaries and autobiographical films, attempt to expand the boundaries of gay discourse and to find a broader, more flexible definition of what it means to be gay in Israel today. Drawing on the cinema of Guttman, but at the same time riding on the back of the wide commercial and critical acclaim received by Fox's films, these filmmakers continue to examine previously unexplored aspects of gay life in Israel. Moving on from Guttman's isolation and from Fox's embrace of

Israeli core values, these filmmakers push the boundaries of the discourse further and search for new means of representation. Trying to define non-heteronormative identities, some of these films blur boundaries, mix genres, and create, in turn, new “hybrid” modes of filmmaking. The blurring or crossing of boundaries, including that between documentary and fiction, reflects and reenacts the blurring of identities such as lesbian, gay, and queer.

Heterosexuality as a Zionist Imperative

I started this project aiming to be as inclusive as possible: my wish was to produce a text that dealt with films about gay men *and* lesbians, as well as bisexuals and transsexuals. My intention was to discuss, equally, the cinematic representations of all the sub-groups that constitute the Israeli gay population. However, I gradually realised that this objective would be difficult to fulfill. Gay male experience, unlike women’s experience, is what I felt personally competent to write about. Furthermore, I have been interested in tracing a particular ideological trajectory that involves gay men more than it does lesbians, namely the development of a strongly normative set of links in Israel between Israeli nationalism/Zionism, the muscular male body and heterosexuality, and the fact that gay cinema in Israel has always had to situate itself somehow in relation to that trajectory, from the early *Bourekas* films to recent fiction and non-fiction work. Nonetheless, this is not a systematic exclusion: some lesbian-themed films are discussed or briefly mentioned in this thesis, in relevance to a particular argument or as part of a larger group of films (*Almost There*, for example, is discussed in the context of the rise of gay and lesbian autobiographical films). I deliberately chose, however, not to engage with lesbian filmmaking in Israel, as it is, or should be, a separate object for study. It deserves its own comprehensive research, which I hope will be conducted in the future.

It is important to note that there are very few films made by or about lesbians, and hardly any made about transsexuals.¹¹ This is one manifestation of

¹¹ A recent film that features a transsexual is Nadav Levitan’s *The Mevorach Brothers* (*Ha’achim Mevorach*, 2000). The film is made in the tradition of the *Bourekas* films of the 1960s and 1970s and focuses on the sexual escapades of three married middle-aged brothers. The transgender

the dominance of the male experience in Israel, epitomized in the image of the heroic warrior, and the relatively marginal status given to women, as Esther Fuchs has argued:

[w]omen as subjects and agents of change are glaringly missing from popular and critical historical accounts on Israel. Canonic accounts of pre-Israeli Zionist thought and ideology rarely include women's names. Histories of modern Israel rarely devote space to women's leadership or contributions to nation building. (5)

Ironically, it is the marginalization of women that has allowed lesbian experiences to go unnoticed, or at least to be seen as less of a threat than male homosexual experiences. Gay men, on the other hand, have had to respond to scorn from male-dominated, heteronormative, militaristic Israeli society. Consequently they have had a greater need to create their own cultural and social circles from which they could re-imagine themselves and their community. However, since at the same time they have enjoyed the privilege of belonging to the dominant male group they have had better means to achieve that. Richard Dyer has argued that

[g]ay men, like straight, have changed in the past twenty-five years, have done some unlearning of masculinity. But we're still mostly brought up to the habits of male privilege. We don't claim them, but we don't think about them either and so continue to enjoy and perpetuate them, at women's expense. (*The Culture of Queers* 47)

The roots of Israel's male-dominant culture can be found in the Zionist quest to create a new society in Palestine (*Eretz Yisrael*), which would be based on the image of the new Jew. The story of homosexuality and gayness in Israel cannot be understood without considering the desire of the Zionist movement, and later, Israeli hegemonic culture, to transform the nature of European Jewish masculinity and create a new type of a Jew and an Israeli man. The transformation of Jewish masculinity was based on the universalistic premise according to which the unmarked norm is masculine and therefore it is masculinity that needs to be modified (unlike femininity which is already marked as different from the norm). Zionism, like most political narratives, utilized sex and gender for ideological and

character is marginal and associated with the sex industry. Despite this unusual portrayal the film had a negligible impact both on the gay community and the Israeli film industry.

propagandistic ends. According to David Biale, the Zionist movement presented itself as an erotic revolution, which allowed young Jews to overcome centuries of sexual repression (183, 189). Heteronormative sexuality and values such as procreation – even though not encouraged explicitly but presented as a by-product of Zionism’s celebrated secularism and nation-building aspiration – were an important part of the new Jewish code.

Gay men and lesbians have been excluded from the public sphere in most societies throughout the years. The dominant heterosexual and familial culture employed heterosexual patriarchy as the “normal” condition, considering homosexuality as “unnatural”. This perception derived from the belief that “men can only continue to rule the world, if they are prepared to live their lives in accordance with their real natures, their essential heterosexuality” (Brittan 65). The Zionist movement was no different, and the public sphere in the new state, ruled by Ashkenazi immigrants, was based upon the same notions of masculinity and power. One of Zionism’s primary goals was to create, or rather recreate, a “muscular” Jew, a concept with which it strove to overcome and reverse the dominant stereotype in Christian Europe of Diasporic Jewish men as feminine.

“Judaism is saturated with femininity”, declared Otto Weininger in his book *Sex and Character* (1906; quoted by Garber 224) in which he attempted to prove that all Jews are inherently women “insofar as they lack any essence and can only imitate the true masculine” (Golomb Hoffman 38). Weininger was not the only one to argue this: it had been a common belief in the years before he wrote. Daniel Boyarin maintains that the common description of women in Victorian culture – “enduringly, incorruptibly, good; instinctively, infallibly wise”, as suggested by John Ruskin (*Unheroic Conduct* 3) – can be easily applied to traditional rabbis. According to Boyarin, the male Jew was often represented as a sort of woman who gave “a set of performances that are culturally read as non-male within a given historical culture” (“Homotopia” 43). The most visible sign of Jewish feminization was the religious act of circumcision, which was associated in the late nineteenth century with “the act of castration, the unmanning, the feminizing of the Jew in the act of making him a Jew” (Gilman, *Sexuality* 265).

Right from its conception Zionism was linked with heterosexuality and manhood as a reaction to the imagery of the effeminate, supposedly homosexual

Jew of the Diaspora. In Max Nordau's view, the redemption of Jews could not be reached solely by their settling in Palestine. It also required a transformation of the Jewish body and mind from the victimized European Diaspora Jews, portrayed as weak and feminine, into their masculine image as heroic warriors, a transformation that would reinstate the link with their glorious pre-Diaspora past.¹² Summarizing a central argument of Nordau's book *Degeneration* (1892), George L. Mosse writes: "[t]he Jew must acquire solid stomachs and hard muscles, not just to overcome his stereotype – though this was important for Nordau – but also to compete, to find his place in the world" (*Confronting* 164).

In Zionist thought, the two goals, that of recreating the Jew as muscular and heterosexual, and of settling in Palestine, could not be separated. As Joseph Massad maintains, "the objective of the Zionist movement was not simply to transplant European Jews into a new geographic area but also to transform the very nature of European Jewish society and identity as it had existed in the Diaspora until then. The locus of this transformation was the European Jew's body" (325). According to Biale, Zionist political ideology "was not only based

¹² It is interesting to note that the view of Jews as feminine is not the only stereotyped representation that has circulated historically. There is also the legacy of warriors such as Samson, Bar Kochba and the Maccabees, who inspired Nordau's vision of Jewry of Muscles, or the rabbinic figures in the Middle Ages, who, according to Daniel Boyarin, "were, at the same time, generals in the armies of Spain, and of course they were just as Jewish as the *Yeshiva-Bokhur* 'sissies'" (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 24). However, these other models were forgotten in the European Diaspora in favour of the model of the *Yeshiva-Bokhur* "sissies" (as Boyarin claims, "Diaspora Jewish culture had little interest in Samson, and its Moses was a scholar" [*Unheroic Conduct* 273]). This was the model that the Zionists, who were mostly *Ashkenazim*, wished to modify. The production of a new Jewish identity in Palestine was proposed as an alternative to this feminine archetype. As much as the concept of the New Jew was celebrated among Zionist settlers, some thought it was necessary to maintain a link to the old-fashioned lifestyle of the Diaspora. A heated debate that revolved around the *Yizkor* book of 1911, a book that was dedicated to eight men who had been killed in clashes with Arabs between the years 1890 and 1911, illustrates the tension that the question of different Jewish models of identification created. One of the contributors to the volume, Zerubavel (Yaakov Vitkin), called for a total break with the culture of *Galut* (exile), but that was not reflected in the volume. According to Jonathan Frankel, for Zerubavel, "[t]o work the soil in the ancient homeland, to settle the country, to defend the settlements, meant to pick up the thread where it had been dropped by the Jewish people with their final defeat by the Romans. He constantly stressed the basic dichotomy between the new life, the new men, with their determination to create an independent nation, and the old life, static, other-worldly, wrapped up in prayers, passive politically and physically. The forces of the *Geula* (Redemption) stood in opposition to those of the *Galut*, the Exile" (440). At the same time, the editors of the volume, Alexander Ziskind Rabinovich and Rabi Binyamin "made it clear in *Yizkor* and in their subsequent comments that, as they saw it, the Second Aliya neither could nor should make so radical a break with Jewish history, tradition as it had developed in the Exile. In their conception, even the book itself was designed to encourage a free interweaving of continuities and discontinuities" (Frankel 441).

on the body as metaphor; it sought, in addition, to transform the Jewish body itself, and especially the sexual body” (176).

The notion of transforming the Jewish sexual body is manifested in Theodor Herzl’s 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland*, a seminal Zionist text. This novel is usually read as a manifesto of the political, social and cultural aspects of the imagined Jewish new society in Palestine. However, in Michael Gluzman’s reading of *Altneuland* the sexual cannot be distinguished from the political. The novel “describes the cultural attempt to ‘cure’ the feminized and melancholic Friedrich Loewenberg, nicknamed ‘Ophelia,’ who in the course of the novel changes from ‘a green, hollow-chested Jewboy’ into a ‘strong oak’” (Gluzman, “Longing” 218). This change is partly the outcome of his long friendship with a German officer named Kingscourt. Gluzman argues that “[t]his homoerotic relationship with the Christian nobleman – who represents ‘true’ masculinity – makes it possible for Friedrich to acquire a masculine body and identity” (“Longing” 218). However, it is also seen as an obstacle to his achieving full heterosexuality. As Gluzman concludes, “[t]he process of Friedrich’s attaining his heterosexual masculinity remains incomplete until he immigrates to Palestine. Only there does he find it possible to break off his libidinal attachment to Kingscourt and enter into a conventional marriage with Miriam” (“Longing” 217-18).

The negation of the Diaspora and the development of the image of the “Muscle Jew”, as Anne Golomb-Hoffman notes, “carry signs of an internalization of the image of the feminized Jewish male” (39), an image that marked Jews’ inferiority and otherness in Christian Europe, similar to the way it marked the inferiority of homosexuals.¹³ Like homosexuals, Jews were seen as biological deviations from the norm. It is not surprising the two were connected and presented as the evil “others” in Christian Europe (Garber 226). The Jews’ alleged feminized nature was often ascribed to the essential difference inherent in them rather than to a social reaction to their stigmatization, and was believed to put

¹³ It was not only European society that needed the “other” but also European Jews who were looking for ways to differentiate themselves from the gentiles. As Daniel Boyarin has observed, “Jewish society needed an image against which to define itself and produce the ‘goy’ – the hypermale – as its countertype [...] This form of Jewish stereotyping of the gentile Other had enormous historical tenacity” (*Unheroic Conduct* 4).

them at risk of becoming homosexuals (Gilman, *Freud* 162). The danger of becoming a sexual pervert, a homosexual in particular, was considered to be one of the biggest threats in European bourgeois societies.¹⁴ It is this feminized Jewish male that the new Jew of Palestine tries to repress. The male Zionist embodies the eternal connection of the warrior, muscle and heterosexual Jew to his ancient land.

The concept of a new, “Muscle Jew” was the blueprint for the heterosexual and militaristic society Israel has turned out to be, a tendency that became even stronger due to the growing dependency of Israeli society on the army, a male-dominated institution. As was the case in many other times and places, gay men in Israel were excluded, if they were acknowledged at all, from the Zionist dream. They were perceived not only as disrupting the gender-oriented new society but also as damaging the security of the state, one of the most sacred values in Israel (hence, the restrictions imposed on recruiting gay men to certain positions in the army – in combat units, for instance – up until recent times). Eventually, a local gay movement emerged in Israel in order to change the legal and social status of gay men and lesbians. This happened, however, long after similar movements had formed in other Western countries. In the late 1960s, after Israel’s sweeping victory in the 1967 Six Day War, Israeli society’s heteronormative and militaristic nature was still very much celebrated. It was not until the 1970s that these sacred values could be challenged, and this critical tendency became even more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s.

Israeli cinema has been instrumental in promoting certain representations of Israeli manhood. This has been achieved through various cinematic genres such as the documentary and pre-state Zionist narrative cinema, the heroic-nationalist genre (a term coined by Ella Shohat), Israeli “New Wave” cinema (known also as “personal” or “modernist” cinema) and the *Bourekas* films. The latter described, in the form of either comedy or melodrama, the conflict between European and Oriental Jews in the new state.¹⁵ Even though these models varied in style and content, they all reinforced (or at least did not undermine) a representation of male

¹⁴ George L. Mosse argues: “[s]exual perversion was thought to be almost as threatening to middle-class life as the restlessness of the lower classes, and much more so than the arrogance of the aristocracy” (*Nationalism* 25).

¹⁵ The genre, which got its name from a Sephardi pastry, was developed during the 1960s and 1970s following the enormous success of Ephraim Kishon’s *Sallah Shabbati* (1964).

heterosexual identity, the perfect antithesis to the stereotyped latently homosexual Jew of the Diaspora.

However, as Raz Yosef claims (using the term “queer”, where I would use “gay”), the relationship between the new Jew and the queer Jew should be read “not in terms of dichotomies, but rather in terms of ambivalence, displacement, and disidentification [...] the queer Jew is not the ‘other’ of the new Zionist ‘self,’ but rather a structural element of it” (*Beyond Flesh* 2-3). It is through a dialectical process that Israeli hegemony has defined itself and its outsiders. In Yosef’s words, “the other *internally* marks the dominant national masculinity, opening an epistemological gap in maleness itself that threatens to undo the national, sexual, and racial authority on which Israeli male heterosexual identity is based” (*Beyond Flesh* 1-2).

Similarly, Alisa Solomon traces opposing forces that shaped the nature of Zionist, and later Israeli, society. According to Solomon, Zionism was not based solely on “masculine” attributes, but on “feminine” ones as well. Solomon sees gayness and the culturally “feminine” signifiers that are attributed to it as integral to the construction of Zionist/Israeli identity: “unlike other military cultures that also hype hypermasculinity, Zionism ascribes a positive value to the soft sabra core as well, for the threat of vulnerability is what guarantees international affection and protection for the state” (158).

As I stated above, this thesis focuses on films that were made at a time when the taboo on explicit gay themes had already been lifted. Unlike many of the films that Yosef examines, those included here were produced in, and thus reflect, a reality in which the basic acknowledgment of the Israeli gay population and culture had already been attained.

The Chapters

My arguments are presented in four chapters. Each chapter is devoted to one particular group of films, united by a shared theme, filmmaker, or generic classification. In my discussion of the films I consider both the films’ plots and narratives and their formal and visual aspects. The latter are discussed mainly, but not exclusively, in relation to Guttman’s films and a few of the documentaries

included in Chapter 5, in which I explore how the visual dimension of the films is used to corroborate, and at times to contradict, the films' narrative dimension or overt themes.

Chapter 2 traces the distinctive characteristics of the imagined Israeli gay community back to its urban setting. It examines the mutual dependency of two interlinked projects: the construction of a gay community and identity, and the re-imagining of the city of Tel Aviv as a cosmopolitan metropolis, influenced by global trends and dissociated from, or in contrast to, the rest of Israeli reality. Some of the films emphasize the role of Tel Aviv as an alternative to Israeli-Zionist ideology, or, in the words of Nurith Gertz, "a geographical representation *par excellence* of the personal narrative" (*Myths* 163). The chapter stresses the interdependence of these two projects: in order to allow the gay community to flourish it was necessary to imagine Tel Aviv as a major cultural urban centre. In order for Tel Aviv to become a major cultural urban centre it was necessary to have a visible gay community in the city. Many of the Tel Aviv films made in the 1980s depict the way in which these two phenomena interact.

The chapter discusses, among other films, two by Amos Guttman and Eytan Fox, whose respective bodies of work as directors are analysed in depth in the next two chapters. The fact that the thesis is structured thematically rather than chronologically means that overlaps are, at times, inevitable. As the two most influential Israeli gay filmmakers, Guttman and Fox set the templates for gay filmmaking in Israel, in relation to which most contemporary gay films have been made since. Their films represent the two extremes of the gay social and cultural spectrum in Israel, namely dissociation from Israeli mainstream culture in the case of Guttman, and a strong wish for total inclusion in the case of Fox. Guttman and Fox's cinema and their contribution to gay culture in Israel deserve a comprehensive discussion, which is offered in Chapters 3 and 4. At the same time, some of their films can be placed within other groupings as well. By including a brief discussion of Guttman's *Amazing Grace* (*Chesed Mufla*, 1992) and of Fox's *Song of the Siren* in Chapter 2, I offer the reader a brief introduction to their work, which is then examined more comprehensively later in the thesis.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which the films of Guttman contributed to the evolution of a gay identity in 1980s Israel. As the first director to develop alternative national and sexual narratives to those offered by the dominant culture,

Guttman marked the beginning of a much more critical and socially committed cinema in Israel. Heavily influenced by 1950s Hollywood melodrama and its appropriation by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Guttman's films – outside the traditional realism that dominated Israeli cinema at the time – captured the marginality of people who lived and died outside the borders of the Zionist-Israeli discourse. The influence of melodrama is also powerfully present at the visual level in the films, which is at times in tension with the overt narrative level. As I shall argue, this tension is an important aspect of Guttman's cinema.

Guttman rejected not only the mainstream ideology but also the prevalent politics of the gay community, which aspired to fit into the master Zionist-Israeli narrative. By including, for example, a sex scene in *Drifting* (1983), in which the white Jewish protagonist renounces his alleged mastery to a nameless Arab, Guttman undermined both the national-Zionist discourse and the demands of the gay community for "positive" images of themselves. Although most of Guttman's films have unmistakably clear gay themes (based on his own experiences), the influence they have had on the ever-changing socio-cultural climate in Israel is much broader. Situating the films in the wider nexus of minority discourse and identity politics raises further questions regarding the possibility of challenging nationalist and normalizing narratives through subversive practices.

Chapter 4 focuses on the work of Eytan Fox, probably the most prolific gay Israeli director since the death of Guttman. Fox's films are the antithesis of Guttman's. They usually adopt, uncritically and unconditionally, heteronormative, Israeli-Zionist values, and shift them from their "natural" context (a heterosexist environment such as a military base, heterosexual couples and family life) to a gay narrative. Fox's films celebrate the revival of the Sabra – the heroic, Ashkenazi soldier who, as the myth goes, would be willing to die for his land – only that in Fox's vision, as opposed to previous Israeli films, the protagonists are gay. It is no wonder that at least two of Fox's films, *Time Off (After)* (1990) and *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), deal with questions of sexual otherness through the prism of army experience, particularly combat experience. This is part of an inevitable dialogue gay men have with the heterosexual hegemony, a dialogue that indicates the impossibility for gay men in Israel to be completely separated from the hegemonic Zionist narrative.

As much as there is a subversive element to Fox's films they still surrender to prevalent and oppressive heteronormative, even colonial, values. In his films there is a strong link between the protagonists' "clean-cut" lifestyle (despite their sexuality) and their Ashkenazi ethnic origin. Fox's films are an example of the alliance between the old liberal-left elite and the gay community, revealing homophobic feelings towards certain groups within the gay minority itself (Oriental Jews, for example) and negating a diversity of gay voices and experiences.

Chapter 5 explores recent films, mainly documentaries and autobiographical films, made by young directors and film students. The chapter links the films' political content to their formal aspects, and examines, among other things, the purpose of the blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in them and what it might serve. The chapter shows how the films construct selfhood, in particular gay/queer selfhood, vis-à-vis the call for collective identity, both from mainstream society and the gay community in Israel. It is important to note that, more than other societies, Israeli society has been based on ideas of collectivism as a social imperative. According to Don Handelman¹⁶

[t]he dominant ideological narratives in Palestine and later in Israel have given primacy to one or another idealistic vision of a Jewish collectivity, equating individualism with the breakdown of their dreams [...] All have diminished the individual as a person with agency. Zionist socialism, the dominant organizing force in Jewish Palestine, held a utopian vision of Jewish autonomy and Jewish statehood, to be attained through social engineering. (38)

This thematic division has enabled me to identify what, I argue, has become an important cultural phenomenon in the past three decades. At the same time it has also allowed me to discuss the inherent differences between these films, which represent the changing phases of the gay movement and cinema in Israel over the years.

The array of voices, explored in the thesis, in Chapter 5 in particular, hints at the myriad possibilities that different Israeli gay groups, and filmmakers within

¹⁶ Handelman bases his argument on Yaron Ezrahi, *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel*, 81-89.

these groups, can now choose from. Like Israeli society as a whole, the gay population in Israel keeps dividing along numerous axes and nodal points. This may take gay men and lesbians further away from the initial hope for a single, unified community, but it promises many more years of challenging filmmaking.

Chapter 2

An Imagined City for an Imagined Community: Tel Aviv and Gay Identity on the Israeli Screen

it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation [...] in the west, and increasingly elsewhere, it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out. It is there that, in our time, the perplexity of the living is most acutely experienced.

Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 319-20.

Queer city histories attract a readership because gay men are intensely urban. Few live by choice in the country on a permanent basis since they usually feel that cities offer a much greater variety of ways in which to enjoy one's life.

David Higgs 2.

the 'real city' is never experienced simply as such, as separate from the 'paper city'. At the same time that the city is experienced as a physically factual built environment, it is also, in the perception of its inhabitants, a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a television programme, a comic strip, and so on.

Victor Burgin 175.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of two interlinked phenomena in Israel: the emergence of a visible urban gay community and the (re)invention of the city of Tel Aviv as the undisputed centre for culture and new social movements. Both Tel Aviv and its gay community are, to different degrees, invented entities, which have continuously fed upon each other. In order for Tel Aviv to imagine itself as the Western metropolis it has aspired to be, it has needed the presence of a discernible gay community to mark it as such. Similarly, gay men and lesbians have needed the city of Tel Aviv as a site from which and in relation to which they could envision their "community".

These two phenomena overlap but are not coterminous: while certain aspects of the "reinvented" Tel Aviv intersect with gay identity and culture,

neither the city nor gay culture is totally reducible to the other. Other cultural processes such as consumerism, Americanization and the decline in traditional Zionist utopian ideals all played a major part in the reinvention of the city of Tel Aviv as well as in the construction of a local gay identity. In this chapter, I aim to explore these processes and their manifestations on screen. The importance of the films I discuss here lies in the contribution they made to the creation of a cultural climate of which the urban gay sensibility became an inseparable part. Sensibility, of course, is an elusive term,¹⁷ and should not be confused with gay presence. For this reason, the majority of the films are not actually gay-themed or gay-authored. Rather, the films capture, even if it was not part of the filmmakers' explicit agenda and was an indirect effect of the films themselves, a moment in the life of the city that enabled the rise of gay consciousness and cinema within it and beyond.

The dialectical relationship between the city and its gay community highlights the discursive nature of both. The city, as a culturally constructed concept, defies an essentialist approach to identities, sexual and other. Cities, like subjectivities, are made by people and changeable. Homosexuality may be experienced outside cities, but gayness, as a shared cultural attribute, which unifies as well as defines a collective, rarely is. As David Forrest notes, "the emergence of the 'homosexual man' – someone able and willing to define himself as a distinct type of individual on the basis of his same-sex desires and behaviour – took place within a largely middle-class, metropolitan milieu" (100-101). Thus, the "urban migration story", namely the exploration of one's gayness in an urban environment, has become a prominent narrative in the category of gayness (Turner 45).

The promise of a progressive Jewish community in a modern, Hebrew city has attracted both ardent Zionist settlers and people from the margins of society, since the foundation of Tel Aviv as "a garden suburb" of Jaffa in 1909.¹⁸ The members of the gay community in Tel Aviv are internal migrants who came to the

¹⁷ In her classic essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), Susan Sontag attends to the problem of giving a precise definition to the term "sensibility". She writes: "[a] sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea" (*Against Interpretation* 276).

¹⁸ For a thorough account of the history of Tel Aviv, see Schlör, *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City*, and Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: The Real City*.

city to experience life in a way that is not possible elsewhere. The city has allowed them to embrace a gay identity and be absorbed into gay social circles. The city has changed their lives, and they have assisted in changing the life of the city. The gentrification of the ageing center of Tel Aviv and the invention of the local press in the early 1980s reflected the new developments in the city and were linked to the establishment of the gay community at that time.

The Tel Aviv Experience

More than an actual metropolis, Tel Aviv is an experience of one. The city was described by the late poet David Avidan as “a weird collage of parts of Manhattan, Los Angeles and Miami Beach” (18). In order to maintain this view of Tel Aviv, the city is constantly “produced” and reinvented in films, novels and the local and national press.

Indeed, like most cities, Tel Aviv was built, to a certain extent, in people’s imagination with words, images, sounds and what Michel de Certeau has called “the practice of everyday life”. Roland Barthes has argued that “[t]he city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it” (92). In praise of the “[t]he chorus of idle footsteps”, Certeau writes how “their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together” (97). Writing about modern urban novels, Hana Wirth-Nesher has argued that “[f]ictional representation of cities intensifies [...] acts of invention and reconstruction that are endemic to metropolitan life” (10).

The discursive creation of cities depends on the ways cities are experienced and/or the function they are expected to fulfill. Avidan’s insistence on seeing in Tel Aviv a miniature model of New York expresses his impression of both cities. Despite the immense difference between them, Tel Aviv for Avidan was just as exciting as the city he equated it with. Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley have argued that “[t]he city is an aggregation or accumulation, not just in demographic, economic or planning terms, but also in terms of feeling and emotion. Cities thus become more than their built environment, more than a set of class or economic relationships; they are also an experience to be lived,

suffered, undergone” (1-2). Similarly, M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos have suggested that the “the conception of the uses of urban places by inhabitants provides one of the components of the image of the city” (8-9).

Yet Tel Aviv was not built on subjective feelings and inspirations alone, but also with concrete and cement. Tel Aviv, like other cities, exists on the verge between the “real” and the “imaginary”. It is an actual geographical site, but its buildings, roads and squares are laden with symbolic, both historical and cultural, significance. Many of the films discussed in this chapter point to the constant tension between the “real” and the “imaginary” planes of the city, and to the inevitable slippage between the two.

Tel Aviv’s architectural legacy is only one example of the way in which the real and the imaginary intersect. The wish for Tel Aviv to represent progress and secularism, as well as an affinity with the West, is well illustrated in the thousands of International-style buildings, designed by German Jews who arrived in Israel in the 1930s. These building, Batya Donner has argued, are “an expression of affiliation with Western civilization” (95). Tel Aviv’s Bauhaus-style “neutral grids” and “flexible and nonsignificant spaces” (Betsky, *Building Sex* 162), were meant to symbolize the progressive modernist ideas upon which the Jewish settlement in Palestine was initially based.

The distinctive nature of Tel Aviv was partly dictated by its geography. Yosefa Loshitzky has argued that “both the geography and demography of Israel’s large cities lend themselves to the creation of, to use Edward Said’s suggestive phrase, ‘imaginative geography’ [...] The hilly and rocky Jerusalem produces the image of a closed, static and conservative city, whereas Tel Aviv, as a beach city, creates an image of an open, dynamic, and permissive metropolis” (“A Tale of Three Cities” 135). The difference in climate has also played a role: Tel Aviv’s humidity may be associated with body fluids and more overt sexuality. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is famous for its dry climate and cold and snowy winters.

Often perceived by Zionist pioneers as a place of “superstition, backwardness, and theocracy [...] national icons and religious relics” (Elon 238-39), Jerusalem has been discarded, first by secular Zionism and later by the gay

and lesbian movement, in favour of Tel Aviv.¹⁹ In films, Jerusalem is traditionally portrayed as a conservative and oppressive city, where non-normative sexual practices are rendered inappropriate and so are scorned. In *Hide and Seek* (*Machbo'im*, Dan Wolman, 1980), for example, a film set in pre-state Jerusalem, the secretive homosexual affair that the protagonist is having with an Arab man is violently disrupted by underground Jewish fighters. Whereas Tel Aviv of the 1960s and 1970s already offered some kind of sexual liberty, as in Uri Zohar's films for example,²⁰ Jerusalem remained a place of tradition and conformism.

Indeed, the city had offered refuge to those who did not fit in the heteronormative Zionist order even before the emergence of the gay movement.²¹ However, this tendency has become more prevalent since the first gay-themed films by Amos Guttman of the late 1970s, and especially his feature films of the 1980s. Guttman's films, which represent the more militant wing of the gay movement in Israel (see Chapter 3), celebrate Tel Aviv as a city that, in a striking contrast to the rest of Israel, can tolerate otherness. The majority of Guttman's films feature characters who leave their provincial town for what they see as a new life in the city.²²

Interestingly, the change in status of the gay community in Israel in recent years, reflected in Eytan Fox's films (see Chapter 4) and in some of the new documentaries discussed in Chapter 5, has also signaled the weakening of the status of Tel Aviv as the ultimate haven for gay men and lesbians. In these films, gay-themed plots move from the centre outward, to the periphery. This move indicates a growing, mainly male, gay presence in Israeli culture. In these films the "urban migration" narrative is no longer the only option available for young gay men. Rather, they attest to the ubiquity of gay culture in contemporary Israeli society, which can be read as a sign of successful integration.

¹⁹ Although the gay community has a presence in Jerusalem and Haifa, and the former was also chosen to host World Pride in summer 2006 (cancelled in the end due to the conflict in Lebanon), the majority of the community's activities take place in Tel Aviv.

²⁰ Especially in Zohar's Tel Aviv trilogy, *Peeping Toms* (*Metzitzim*, 1972), *Big Eyes* (*Einayeem G'dolot*, 1974) and *Save the Lifeguard* (*Hatzilu et Hamatzil*, 1976).

²¹ See Fink & Press, particularly the interview with Theo Mainz (321-64), and Kama, "From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*".

²² Although Guttman's films, with the exception of *Amazing Grace* (*Chesed Mufla*, 1992), are not extensively discussed in this chapter, I often refer to them, especially in relation to Ayelet Menahemy's *Crows*.

The “integrationist” approach of the Israeli gay community (Walzer 250) may also explain the absence of an official, or at least a well-defined, gay district in Tel Aviv, unlike in most Western capitals. The establishment of separate gay districts is a fairly new phenomenon, linked to the emergence of a politically oriented, minority-modeled gay identity in the United States in the 1960s. According to David Higgs, there has been “a quantum leap” in gay districts, or villages as they are sometimes called, since the 1970s (8). The existence of such demarcated areas helps to develop an economic infrastructure and allows cultural life to flourish. Gay districts are important because of the dual roles they play: they are both places to which young gay men and women from the hinterland move in order to come to terms with their sexuality, and economic and political centers for the community (Lauria and Knopp 161). At the same time, gay districts are often seen as ghettos, serving as buffers between the community and the rest of society. In the case of Israel, the foundation of a separate gay district, either official or not, would contradict the movement’s fundamental aspiration for total integration.

The task I undertake in this chapter is twofold: to trace the trajectories on the screen of two phenomena – the emergence of the gay movement and the reinvention of Tel Aviv since the 1980s – and to explore the influences they have had on one another. This chapter offers close textual analysis of films that present Tel Aviv as a generator and a symbol of social change. Not all the films included in this chapter fall into one of the conventional definitions of gay films. However, they have all had an important role to play in cementing the connection between the city of Tel Aviv and alternative modes of existence in contemporary Israel.

Some of the later films discussed in this chapter represent Tel Aviv as a postmodern dystopian alternative to Israeli hegemonic culture. In their harsh critique of state institutions, they open up a space in which new subjectivities and practices can be constituted. Although Tel Aviv has always been an inseparable part of the Zionist project, it has also formed a strong alternative to Zionist and Israeli core values. Responding to disturbing events that interrupted life in the city, such as the first Gulf War in 1991, these films emphasize the end of the Zionist-Israeli utopian vision of a new Jewish life as it has manifested itself in Tel Aviv. Other films expand the boundaries of the Israeli discourse around sexuality and gender, and, subsequently, undermine the forced heteronormative nature of

mainstream Israel. All films share an imaginary vision of Tel Aviv as a city in which sexual, social and cultural dispositions are being constantly reexamined and altered.

***Crows* (Ayelet Menahemy, 1987): The City as a Sanctuary**

Crows (*Orvim*, 1987), Ayelet Menahemy's short film, was produced four years after the release of Amos Guttman's long version of *Drifting* and one year after *Bar 51*. It is close to these two films not only in its time of production but also in its visual and thematic credo. *Crows*, an expressionistic fable about a group of Israeli runaways who live in a commune in Tel Aviv, can be seen as a sequel to Guttman's early cinema (his short films and first two feature films). Like Guttman's films, *Crows* depicts the life of Israeli outcasts, gay teenage boys, in their escapist world. Menahemy, like Guttman, wrote and directed *Crows*, her breakthrough film, while still a student (she and Guttman attended the same film school, Beit Tzvi in Ramat Gan), and claimed to have based it on some of the actors' as well as on her own personal experiences. Boaz Turjeman, who stars in both short and long versions of *Drifting*, plays a similar character in *Crows*, a flamboyant gay teenager. His performance links Menahemy's film with those of Guttman.

Menahemy's reference to Guttman's films can be seen as an attempt to reinforce Guttman's view on sexual marginality and alienation in militaristic 1980s Israel. Both Guttman and Menahemy turned to foreign cinema for inspiration: while Guttman was heavily influenced by Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films, Menahemy's depiction of Tel Aviv as a decadent metropolis alludes, whether deliberately or not, to the outlandish vision of New York City in Slava Tsukerman's *Liquid Sky* (USA, 1982). Akin to the latter's nihilistic attitude and expressionist visuals, Menahemy's film was based on a postmodern – in the Israeli context read also as post-Zionist – narrative, which aimed at abolishing hierarchies and boundaries, and hyper-realistic design. Menahemy's film is also similar to those of American filmmaker Susan Seidelman (who directed her debut feature film, *Smithereens*, in 1982, followed by the commercially successful *Desperately Seeking Susan* in 1985) in focusing on what Richard K. Ferncase has

described as a “suburban refugee who becomes a city girl, caught up in the excitement and chaos of the urban environment” (50). This narrative is similar to the gay “urban migratory story” discussed by Mark W. Turner.

While *Liquid Sky* was a sci-fi tale featuring aliens in search of a euphoria-inducing chemical produced by the human brain during orgasm, *Crows* introduces Tel Aviv to another kind of alien – although no less dangerous, in the eyes of the establishment – in the shape of a flamboyant group of homosexuals wearing bizarre costumes and hairdos. As Emanuel Levy has pointed out, *Liquid Sky*, directed by a Soviet émigré to the States, portrays the city as a sanctuary for foreigners, be they immigrants, space-aliens, or merely outsiders: “Like the aliens, the filmmaker was an explorer of exotic pleasures denied him in his native country [...] Tsukerman satirizes the New York demimonde of spaced-out models, junkies, and performance artists” (185-86). *Liquid Sky* portrays the city as a site in which old conventions are demolished in favour of a new world order. As one of the characters claims, when asked about her sexual identity: “homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, whether I like someone doesn’t depend on the genitals as long as I find them attractive. I’m always curious why people have to make these sexual definitions”.

Drawing on *Liquid Sky*’s nocturnal urban atmosphere and sexual and gender rebellion, *Crows* tries to emphasize the extravagant lifestyle of its characters, compared to the uniform lives led by most of their Israeli non-gay counterparts. *Crows*, like Guttman’s films of the same era, renders gay life as an exotic way of life, outside heteronormative, ordinary Israel. This tendency did not fit in with the respectable image and integrationist agenda the gay community aspired to at the time. Like Guttman, in his bold, unapologetic portrayal of gay sex and demonstrable anti-Zionist sentiments, Menahemy aims, first and foremost, to shock the audience. Her sympathetic representation of idle “freaks”, living in a rundown flat and scavenging for food, mocks the values of the society that rejected them.

The story of the gay commune in *Crows* is told from the point of view of another misfit, Margalit (Gili Benousilio), a girl from a remote village who enters their lives. The film begins with her running away from home to Tel Aviv. In a voiceover narration she says: “in such a small country, if someone decides to run away it is always to Tel Aviv”. Wandering the streets of the city she runs into

Yuval (Turjeman) and Eli (Doron Barbi) who take her to the commune they share with a group of eccentric homosexuals and transvestites. For Margalit, who introduces herself to the others as Maggie, this is a first encounter with gay men. In a voice-over she comments: "I never knew anything about homosexuals, but now it seems like the most logical thing in the world". During the time she spends with the group (as she informs the spectators in a voice-over, she had intended to leave the next day but somehow found herself staying), she reinvents herself with the help of the others.

Changing her name from Jewish-Israeli Margalit to Western Maggie is only the first step she takes in her efforts to erase her past, and her Israeli identity. With her shorn hair, shaved by one of the members of the group, and dressed in a man's suit, Maggie sports a new appearance that blurs her sexual identity and gender, and echoes the androgynous Margaret, the main character in *Liquid Sky*, and her male alter ego, Jimmy (both played by Anne Carlisle). Maggie adopts a rootless existence, like that of the city of Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv, according to popular myth, was established "from the sands", and has been known as the city without a past ever since. It is synonymous with reinvention, progress and liberal thinking (the word *Hol* in Hebrew, meaning "sand", also stands for "secular"). Maggie's reinvention encapsulates the idea of Tel Aviv as a city in constant transformation, and, although known as the "first Hebrew city", also cosmopolitan and pluralistic.²³

The members of the group she joins gradually become her alternative family. Despite their frequent feuds, they give Maggie a sense of belonging that she has never had before. She decided to run away because ever since her mother, who had suffered from a mental illness, committed suicide, her father neglected her. As she is seen sneaking from her father's farm, she says in a voice-over: "my

²³ The concept of Tel Aviv as a "rootless" city is prevalent in modern Israeli mythology and is captured in numerous novels and films. This myth has been countered in post-Zionist works such as Tamar Berger's *Dionysus at Dizengof Centre*. In her book Berger tells the story of the deportation of the Palestinian population by the new Israeli state in 1948 through the archaeological history of "Dizengof Centre", the first shopping mall in Tel Aviv. In his essay "Re-imagining the 'White City': The Politics of World Heritage Designation in Tel Aviv/Jaffa", Mark LeVine criticizes UNESCO's exclusion of Jaffa from its report on International style architecture in the city. LeVine sees it as an emblem of the Zionist colonial discourse that portrayed Tel Aviv as a solely Jewish city, raised "from the sand", and "erased" Jaffa from "the narrative of the region's modern architecture and planning" (222).

dad, he doesn't give a damn [...] all he can think of is my mum. I knew he wouldn't look for me". Maggie carries a picture of a beautiful woman whom she claims was her mother. Only later does she admit that her mother was nothing like the woman in the picture. In her endless attempts to make her life more bearable, the commune she finds herself in is the only place where she does not need to pretend.

Traumatized by her mother's death, Maggie is especially alarmed by the repeated suicide attempts of transvestite Daniel (Itzik Nini). It is his death at the end of the film that marks the disintegration of the group. Maggie then leaves for an unknown destination and an unknown future, an open ending which reflects the filmmaker's sombre view on the readiness of 1980s Israeli society to accept those who are different from the norm. The open ending is quite ironical against the background of *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation, narratives, which Maggie's story seems to follow at first.²⁴ Maggie's experiences in Tel Aviv do not pave the way to successful integration in society, the outcome of the classic male *Bildungsroman*; it is doubtful whether they lead to "the evolution of a coherent self" (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 13), the objective of the female *Bildungsroman*.

Menahemy, like Guttman, depicted her protagonists' existence as the antithesis of the fundamental principles that Israeli society is based upon. Her characters live in the Israel of the early 1980s, but create for themselves a parallel universe in which there is no trace of national symbols such as the IDF, or traumas such as the Lebanon war. Leading a nocturnal life, the characters in *Crows* do not take part in the life of productive, day-time Tel Aviv, and hardly make contact with fellow Israelis. Their brief encounter with ultra-Orthodox Jews, whose ritual baths are located opposite their flat, is one of very few instances in which people outside their coterie enter the frame. However, this encounter does not lead to dialogue: the only sign of communication between them is when Maggie and her friends play a trick on their Orthodox neighbours. Standing at two opposite poles of Israeli society, the chance meeting between Orthodox Jews and a group of young misfits represents the unbridgeable chasm in Israeli society.

²⁴ As Marianne Hirsch argues, "[t]he novel of formation's concern is both *biographical* and *social*. Society is the novel's *antagonist* and is viewed as a school of life, a locus for experience. The spirit and values of the social order emerge through the fate of one representative individual. Consequently, the novel of formation does not represent a panorama of society and might thus be distinguished from the panoramic or social novel" (297).

While both groups are presented as each other's nemesis, it is important to note that ultra-Orthodox Jews are also traditionally perceived as great opponents of secular Zionism and liberal Israel. Their presence in the film, therefore, describes the clash between homosexuality and Judaism rather than homosexuality and Israeli heteronormative society. Menahemy has chosen to show two marginal subgroups but to avoid representing dominant Israeli culture, a choice that emphasizes the uniqueness of Tel Aviv as a neutral space where one can escape oppressive hegemonic culture.

In contrast to the "integrationist" approach that was adopted by the gay community, and similar to the Orthodox Jews they come across, Menahemy's characters intentionally separate themselves from anything "Israeli". The outside world is not allowed in the realm of the flat they share, not even its representations: the TV set is placed lopsided in a supermarket trolley and shows nothing but "snow". As Maggie says in a voice-over, life in the commune does not start until nightfall, which is their cue to dress up and go out. They all divide their time between the flat and the club where Yuval works as a dancer (there is also one scene which takes place backstage at a fashion show where Yuval works as a make-up artist).

They only step out of their small demarcated world twice. In the first instance they are seen trying to hitch a ride back to Tel Aviv but are refused time and again because of their appearance. The industrial, deserted landscape of the power station in Hadera, a small town between Tel Aviv and Haifa, is behind them, and lends an apocalyptic tone to the scene. Abandoned on the margins of a highway, their alienation from society is further emphasized. The second time is when they take a trip to Tel Baruch beach, an infamous centre for prostitution on the northern edge of Tel Aviv. This trip ends with Daniel's death from an overdose and the subsequent disintegration of the group. The encounter with other parts of Israel, namely outside the borders of central Tel Aviv, proves to be deathly.

The spectator does not get to see the *moshav* (smallholders' cooperative settlement), which Maggie runs away from, apart from a short series of shots in the beginning of the film that serves as an exposition. However, the film does use the country/town binary to highlight the differences between Tel Aviv and the rest of Israel. As Joachim Schlör has argued, "between 1967 and 1990, Tel Aviv

turned, culturally speaking, away from Israel and towards the West [...] During those years Tel Aviv seemed in a curious way to be living up to the ideal of its founders that it should be ‘a city without a history’” (258-59). Urban settlers, as much as their agrarian counterparts, were considered a part of the Zionist project. Ilan S. Troen has argued that “[w]hile farmers developed an agricultural economy even as they built ideal communities, urban pioneers created the industry and commerce to sustain cities that conformed to their social and political visions” (113).

However, in time, the metropolitan image and aspirations of Tel Aviv marked the city out as a separate entity. The *moshav*, like the *kibbutz*, is linked to the creation of the New Jew. Only in agrarian settings could the New Jew live up to his dream. Turning away from the culture of the Diaspora, the new society in Palestine, and later Israel, adopted a new set of values, epitomized in the creation of agriculture-based, socialist-inspired settlements. As Oz Almog has shown, the *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* were inseparable from Zionism, the temples of the new national religion where true Zionist worshipping was performed: “cultivating the nation’s land, settling the country’s distant frontiers, guarding it against attackers, and living a life of cooperation and communal solidarity. The fathers of the kibbutz necessarily became the revered priests of the new religion, and their Sabra children were the novitiates” (*The Sabra* 22). Yet shortly after the establishment of the state, Israel was already mostly urban. Its first master plan (also known as the Sharon plan, 1950) advocated an extensive network of metropolitan areas, regional cities and development towns. According to Troen, “[i]ts adoption signified that the initial Zionist dream of renaissance in a physiocratic utopia of Jewish peasants had been supplanted by a vision of a modern, urban, technologically advanced society modeled on Western Europe and Japan” (167). The turn to a free market economy since the 1980s (Almog, “The Globalization of Israel” 234) signaled a dramatic change in the power balance between urban and farm life. Israel rapidly became more urban than the world’s most developed countries. By 2003 91.8% of its population was living in cities.²⁵

²⁵ See *The Economist* annual report, 2003.

The urbanization of Israel reinforced the symbolic meaning that the *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* have had in Zionist and Israeli ideology. As Bruce King has stated:

[n]ationalism is an urban movement which identifies with the rural areas as a source of authenticity, finding in the 'folk' the attitudes, beliefs, customs and language to create a sense of national unity among people who have other loyalties. Nationalism aims at [...] rejection of cosmopolitan upper classes, intellectuals and others likely to be influenced by foreign ideas. (quoted by Brennan 53)

The implied contrast between the city and the village, as it is featured in *Crows*, animates the old Zionist debate about the role of the city in the new Jewish society. The film's portrayal of Tel Aviv confirms the view of the opponents of city life, who believe it is a nest of sexual deviants. In the first shot of Tel Aviv, right after Maggie arrives at the city, she is seen walking down a crowded street in the old central bus station with her back to a giant sex cinema sign, which heralds the loss of innocence the city inevitably brings with it.

However, the city is where Maggie's life is saved. At one point in the film she opens up to Daniel and tells him about her mother's madness. Her mental state became worse, Maggie says, because of her life in the *moshav*. "I do not want to live my life like she did", Maggie exclaims, implying she would have ended the same way had she stayed. Whereas the city is traditionally perceived as an isolating place, Menahem portrays it as the only place where people like Maggie and the members of the group she becomes part of are accepted. Paradoxically, in order to be accepted they have to form their own communal group, which is based upon similar "socialist" notions to those of the *kibbutz* or the *moshav*.

The *moshav* and the Zionist mentality it symbolizes, on the other hand, is rendered dangerous, as it rejects those who do not fit in the dominant culture (the crows of the title), and pushes them to either suicide or escape. As Igal Bursztyn points out, although *Crows* makes use of symbols of a pastoral, village life such as a ploughed field, a scarecrow and cowsheds, they carry a dark, menacing meaning. Feelings of danger and threat are expressed by the dark skies, the bonfire in front of the warehouse, the village houses that look like black stains and the grotesque scarecrow (Bursztyn, "Introduction" 15).

Running away from home after being abandoned by both her parents, Maggie experiences the city as her sanctuary. The city, the film suggests, can offer the security the *moshav* and heteronormative Zionism cannot, even if only for a short while, until the group disintegrates. The disintegration of the group, symbolizing the end of hope for the protagonists, also brings with it the end of the film. The future of the characters remains unknown but is partially unfolded in *Tel Aviv Stories* (1992), which Menahemy co-wrote and co-directed. This film takes the role of its characters and the city one step further in liberating the stagnant Israeli collective and heteronormative way of thinking. *Tel Aviv Stories* allows its characters what *Crows* could not: this is a film whose protagonists are no longer passive victims of an oppressive system, but rather characters who dare to try and change their given position in the world.

***Tel Aviv Stories* (Nirit Yaron and Ayelet Menahemy, 1992): The Fictionalized City and its “New Bohemians”**

Tel Aviv Stories (1992), as its title suggests, was conceived as the Israeli version of *New York Stories* (Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, USA, 1989). Like the latter, *Tel Aviv Stories* comprises three different episodes that are meant to offer different points of view on life in the city. The title song suggests that Tel Aviv is not New York, and some of the critics agreed with this statement, arguing that the film, especially the two first episodes, surrenders to the image that the local press has created rather than reflecting the city's life as it “really” is.²⁶ Given that this is what films, and culture in general, do, namely construct meaning rather than reflect reality, I am interested in what kind of fictional construction *Tel Aviv Stories*, like the rest of the films examined in this chapter, offers.

The film can also be seen as a sequel to Judd Ne'eman's feature *The Dress* (*Hasimla*, 1969; made up of three episodes: “The Dress”, “The Letter” and “The Return of Thomas”). Like Ne'eman's film, *Tel Aviv Stories* develops three stories that take place in the city. Both films focus on young people in their mid-to-late-

²⁶ See, for instance, Ofer Shelach's review in *Ma'ariv*, March 29, 1992.

twenties and their complex love affairs, rather than on broader issues of national identity. Ella Shohat has argued that the three episodes of *The Dress* “revolve around attempts at communicating”, and one of them in particular, “The Return of Thomas”, “is reminiscent of Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim* in its triangular love affair of two men and a woman” (198). Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul calls attention to the film’s “abstract European ambience” which supplants references to the specific society to which the protagonists belong (109).

Both films represent Tel Aviv as a vibrant city with its face to the West. In *The Dress* the soundtrack consists of jazz and rock music with English lyrics. The scene in the second episode, in which the protagonist is looking for his love interest in a club with a beat band performing in the background, is reminiscent of the Yardbirds’ performance in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966), one of the key films that defined “Swinging London” in the mid 1960s. Ne’eman was one of the main members of the Israeli “New Wave” movement, which adopted a more improvised, impressionistic approach in order to break with the dominant realist tradition in Israeli cinema at the time. In *The Dress* he finds in Tel Aviv a resemblance to Paris. Similarly, Yaron and Menahemy portray the centre of Tel Aviv as a bohemian, art-oriented district in a Western city. Even the last episode, clearly the most “Israeli” of all, still takes place in Shalom Tower (Migdal Shalom), an architectural landmark that symbolized the beginning of Israel’s rapid process of Americanization. It was built in 1961 on the site of the old Hertzliya High School, the first public building in Tel Aviv and the first Hebrew high school. Shalom Tower was the first, and for many years the only, skyscraper in Tel Aviv, with a large American-style department store and wax museum, both of which feature in the episode.

The film epitomized the new, urban culture that was promoted during the 1980s by the local press. The first Tel Aviv local newspaper was *Ha’ir* (“the city”), first published in October 1980. The weekly magazine was inspired by publications such as New York’s *The Village Voice*. The publication of *mekomonim* (local newspapers) not only revolutionized the print media in Israel but also strengthened Tel Aviv’s status as Israel’s centre for culture and the arts (even though the first local newspaper *Kol Ha’ir* in Israel appeared in Jerusalem in 1979). Journalist Tom Segev has commented on *mekomonim*:

[t]he ideological party-sponsored dailies abundant in the prestate period and Israel's early years closed one after another in the 1970s and 1980s. They were replaced by publications addressing issues previously unfamiliar to most Israelis, such as environmental quality, consumerism, and the local leisure culture. At around the same time a new style appeared, unacceptable in the Israeli press of the past. New journalism was a direct import from the United States via writers who had spent time there. (68)

Most of today's senior journalists in Israel's national newspapers started their careers in the local press. They brought with them its distinctive writing style and agenda and implemented it in the more "respectable" and wide-reaching national press.

The *mekomonim*'s "new journalism", which meant bringing the writer to the fore rather than the topic s/he was sent to cover, was part of a shift of emphasis from collective issues to the concerns of the individual. The emergence of a new, personal style of writing in Israeli journalism occurred in tandem with the strengthening of privatization and consumerism, processes Israeli society has undergone since the 1960s. This gave rise to both the breakdown of the *kibbutzim*, and a dramatic change in sexual norms, of which the rise of a visible gay culture was a direct outcome. Segev claims that Israel's new individualistic awareness "encouraged equality between the sexes and sexual permissiveness, and gave a measure of legitimacy to unconventional sexual orientations" (69).

The *mekomonim* first appeared at the beginning of a great internal migration from other parts of Israel to Tel Aviv and they documented its influence on the new urban culture developed in those years. *Tel Aviv Magazine* dedicated a special issue in September 1992 to the "new Tel Aviv residents", in which native Tel Aviv residents and migrants to the city examined their different perceptions of it. In their writings about the city the new migrants were inspired by a fantasized concept of a cosmopolitan metropolis.²⁷

The invention of the local newspapers was one way of reinforcing the image of Tel Aviv as an exciting urban centre. Celebrating five years of *Ha'ir* in 1985, Israeli commentator Doron Rosenblum wrote that it had not been long before it became impossible to differentiate between writers' fiction and the

²⁷ See conversation between Amir Kaminer and Rami Rotholtz, *Tel Aviv Magazine*, 25 Sep. 1992: 16-19.

reality of the city. Their words, he claimed, rebuilt the city, which was gradually becoming more vibrant, culturally diverse, democratic and self-aware. In this way the *mekomonim* did not only reflect cultural processes that took place in the city in the 1980s and 1990s; they also contributed towards creating them. The *mekomonim* have been credited with the invention a new Tel Aviv jargon and style of writing as well as setting a new agenda. Urgent national issues were pushed aside in favour of cultural and local events. The *mekomonim* created a cultural and social scene with a distinctive discourse, definite social codes and local heroes. Like other cultural scenes at the time, such as the Israeli rock music scene of the early 1980s, which adopted elements from the English and European post-punk music scenes, elements that can be traced in the set and costume designs in *Crows*, it aspired to imagine Tel Aviv as a bustling metropolis. The *mekomonim* emphasized the resemblance of Tel Aviv to New York and London as much as they blurred the link between Tel Aviv and the rest of Israel.

Putting a great emphasis on the construction of Tel Aviv as a subversive alternative to the rest of Israel, the local press perceived the nascent Israeli gay culture as an important and inseparable part of the city. Gay lifestyles, at least in the early and mid-1980s, and despite the attempts of *Agudah*, represented an anti-establishment, anti-normative attitude, which fitted in well with the agenda of the local press. Gay men and women helped expand Tel Aviv's urban infrastructure through their bars and clubs, and added a sexualized, permissive dimension to the city with Independence Park, for example, functioning as a central, though unauthorized, cruising spot for gay men. In the mid-1980s *Ha'ir* started publishing a weekly column called *Moshe* by an anonymous writer later revealed to be Gal Uchovsky, a journalist, scriptwriter and TV presenter. The column described the ordinary life of a gay couple in Tel Aviv and was seminal in its "matter-of-fact" approach to the subject, already very different from that of Amos Guttman's films, which were made only a few years earlier.²⁸ Uchovsky, who wrote in the column about his life with his partner (director Eytan Fox),

²⁸ *Moshe* was not the first gay column in Israeli print media. A series of articles in the now defunct *Davar*, a daily newspaper identified with the Labour Party, in 1980, entitled "Pictures from a Married Life", preceded it. Tuvia Mendelsohn, the writer of "Pictures from a Married Life", documented the life of an Israeli gay couple in Amsterdam. According to Amit Kama, the column portrayed "Israelis who felt that their homeland had alienated them for good, and immigrated to the Netherlands" ("From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*" 141). *Moshe*, on the other hand, portrayed the life of an Israeli gay couple in Tel Aviv.

maintained this approach throughout his career. In his journalistic work (he became the chief editor of *Ha'ir* in the early 1990s before moving on to the national press), his art and culture TV programme, and in the films he made with Fox, he stressed the “normalcy” and “casualness” of gayness, to the extent that its uniqueness and subversive manners almost completely vanished in the wish for total integration.²⁹ Nonetheless, Uchovsky has played an important role in shifting the attitude towards homosexuality and gayness in Israeli society since he started publishing *Moshe*. He would not have been able to achieve that without establishing himself first in Tel Aviv.

Tel Aviv Stories was perceived by many as the cinematic version of the fictitious Tel Aviv of the local press. The film was even sponsored by *Tel Aviv Magazine*, one of the two leading local weeklies at the time. Most reviews argue that this construction of a fictitious city was a flaw in a film which otherwise could have been considered an impressive technical and artistic achievement.³⁰ The film, however, became a commercial success, and not only in Tel Aviv. It attracted more than 150 thousand viewers (Berenhaimer 42), the majority of whom, 78 per cent, watched it outside Tel Aviv. The success of the film attested to the spreading of what, in the 1980s, was considered an esoteric culture to the rest of Israel in the 1990s. Tel Aviv exported not only “its” cinema but also literature and music, which until then had been solely identified with a demarcated geographical space (Berenhaimer 44).

The opening episode, *Sharona, Honey* (*Sharona, Motek*) tells the story of a young assistant art director (Yael Abecassis) and her four overly enthusiastic suitors. The episode includes a brief appearance by Amir Kaminer, a gay journalist who had become a well-known figure in Tel Aviv nightlife in those years, mainly due to his unique camp demeanour. By casting Kaminer as himself (he also appeared in Amos Guttman’s *Amazing Grace* and Eytan Fox’s *Song of the Siren*) Menahemy reaffirms the immanence of gay culture in the “new bohemian” scene of the city.

Of the three, this episode was seen as the most artificial piece. The protagonist’s career is not seen as “real” enough, let alone important. At one point in the episode one of Sharona’s lovers tries to convince her to go to Los Angeles

²⁹ See also my analysis of *Song of the Siren* in this chapter and Chapter 4.

³⁰ See, for example, Yehuda Stav’s review in *Yediot Achronot*, 5 Apr. 1992.

with him where working with sets, props and costumes is “a real profession”. The lives the characters lead seem to be out of touch with Israeli national concerns. The cosmopolitan nature of Tel Aviv seems to be more fantasized than authentic. The filmmakers admitted to having modified certain visual elements in order to give a more appealing look to the city. Yaron said: “I sweated in order to make Tel Aviv look as pretty and reasonably visual as possible. I ‘made up’ locations. A whole building was wrapped with yellow paper, so it would not be seen in the frame”. Menahemy said: “there is the real Tel Aviv and the Tel Aviv that you dream about [...] You do not change reality by making it prettier. You do not create a mutation but simply bring it closer to the cinematic world you build up in your imagination” (Shaked 74).

The second episode, *A Cat Operation (Mivtsa Chatul)* tells the story of Tsofit (Ruthie Goldberg), a local newspaper journalist, who, in the midst of a series of personal crises (her husband leaves her for his lover and she is about to lose her job) and suicide attempts, tries to save the life of a kitten, trapped in a sewage tunnel. With scenes that sarcastically depict the inflated local art scene (echoing Martin Scorsese’s *Life Lessons*, the first episode in *New York Stories*), the second episode, like the first, is a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of a group of urban people, most of whom work either in the media or in the arts, and who are all equally disconnected from the national Israeli agenda.

Only the third episode, *Divorce (Get)*, decidedly exceeds the limits of imaginary urban experience and touches upon wider issues concerning modern Israeli reality. The episode tells the story of a policewoman (Anat Waxman), a deserted wife, who spots her husband while patrolling in Migdal Shalom. Determined to force him to give her *get* (according to Jewish rabbinic law, the woman is not considered divorced until her husband agrees to divorce her), she takes her superior officer and other passers-by, one of whom is a rabbi, hostage. When her husband, an escaped criminal, offers her the long-awaited *get* on condition that she does not hand him over to the police, she refuses. In her search for revenge, Tikva (Hope in Hebrew) is willing to risk all that she has: her job, children, and freedom.

The three films differ from each other in set design, characterization and the stance they take towards Tel Aviv life. Each episode depicts a different side of the city, although they all take place in the same geographical area, the central-



Fig. 2.1 Tikva (Anat Waxman) in *Tel Aviv Stories*. Reproduced from Schnitzer.



Fig. 2.2 The protagonists of the “The Letter”, the second episode in *The Dress*. Reproduced from Schnitzer.

southern part of the city as opposed to the newer, more bourgeois northern part. Where the first episode tries to capture glamorous bohemian life – the protagonist moves from one chic flat to another, stops at a fashion shoot and ends up in a trendy bar – the last episode explores the life of a wretched policewoman, a single mother whose conservative lifestyle prevents her getting involved with men. Whereas Sharona cheats on her boyfriend with at least one lover, and flirts simultaneously with two others, Tsofit and Tikva react in a different way to their complicated love affairs: Tsofit tries to commit suicide because her husband abandoned her and Tikva confesses to her hostages that since her husband left her she has been celibate for five years.

However, the similarities between the episodes cannot be overlooked. Not only did the same two women writer-directors collaborate on them;³¹ they also deal with female protagonists, who defy a chauvinistic and discriminating system. Sharona struggles with her men and their demands, Tsofit tries to avoid her male editor and former husband while fighting with male municipality clerks who do all they can to make her cat rescue operation impossible, and Tikva loses control when she realizes her husband has managed to escape once again. She then has to fight her male commander who comes to arrest her. In one scene she throws fireworks at the police force, declaring: “this is my independence day”. She celebrates her independence not only from her husband but also from the male-dominated state organization she works for: the spectators are reminded throughout the episode that Tikva’s promotion was denied because she had refused to have sex with her chief commander. It is therefore symbolic that her struggle for independence takes place inside a skyscraper, seen metaphorically as a phallic architectural symbol, one that represents might and masculinity.³²

The three episodes come to explore the psyche of the city and they all do so from a female perspective, an unusual angle in Israeli cinema before the early 1990s. This interconnection between the exploration of women’s lives and the life of the city is not accidental. The film, as a whole, produces a statement regarding

³¹ Menahemy wrote and directed *Sharona*, Motek, Yaron wrote and directed *A Cat Operation* and they both collaborated on *Get*: Yaron wrote and Menahemy directed.

³² Aaron Betsky has observed: “[m]ale body imagery is everywhere, from the phallic constructions of skyscrapers to the ‘muscular’ constructions of our civic buildings. Men rule, and their power is made real through architecture” (*Building Sex* xii). These phallic connotations can be seen as “the very real result of a male-dominated, aggressive, and power-based attitude toward the way we live in and experience the real world” (Betsky, *Building Sex* 28).

the role of Tel Aviv as a site in which the old, sexist and heteronormative values of Israeli society should be re-examined and changed. As in Guttman's *Drifting* and *Bar 51* and Menahemy's *Crows*, the city in *Tel Aviv Stories* is not merely a background but a generating factor: its landmarks, cultural scenes and people have a direct influence on both the events and the actions of the protagonists seen on the screen.

The identification of the women protagonists with the city is unequivocal. At the end of *Sharona*, *Motek* Sharona is seen chasing a garbage truck and she sits on it, looking from afar on her four confused suitors. The workers clear the streets of the heaps of garbage that were piled up during their long strike. The end of the strike, which brings the clean-up of the city, signals the beginning of Sharona's own cleansing process. Instead of adjusting to her lovers' wishes and plans – two of them want to have a child with her – she leaves them behind, reclaiming her freedom. Even before that Sharona is seen smashing binoculars that were used by the four men to spy on her from the balcony of a flat across the street, and by doing so she demolishes their penetrative gaze.

As Orly Lubin points out ("The Woman as Other" 313-15), the first two episodes of *Tel Aviv Stories* focus on the formation of a female sexuality and an autonomous female subject, who is no longer dependent on the masculine world, and who is able to fulfill her own wishes and needs. In Tikva's case, Lubin argues, her claim to independence and freedom is more complicated, as she cannot give up her wish for the hegemonic masculine authority's approval (represented by the religious rabbinic system, the police and the prison to which she is likely to be sent). Unlike Tsofit and Sharona she cannot settle for an optional "alternative" feminine order, namely moving on with her life while ignoring the restrictions the system has set up for her. It is implied in the film that Tikva's poor socio-economic background and conservatism, suggesting a Mizrahi ethnicity (although this is not made clear in the episode) may explain her difficulty in resisting the institutional restrictions imposed on her. Moreover, of the three characters, Tikva is the only one who has children – representing a more normative way of life – and whose place of residence is unknown. Tikva works in the city, but it is not clear if this is also where she lives. Thus, Tikva's identification with the city and its alleged feminist, challenging values, as they were elaborated in the first two episodes, is, at best, partial and ambiguous.

The intersection of a feminist perspective and the city in *Tel Aviv Stories* brings up questions regarding the role of the city as facilitating an alternative sexual and gendered space. The resistance shown by the female characters in the three episodes and their determination, especially in the first two episodes, to live their lives in accordance with their own wishes, echoes the struggle that gay men and, even more so, lesbians and transsexuals, are faced with. The similarities between the four groups – gay men, straight women, lesbians and transsexuals – are numerous. Of all four groups it seems that gay men have achieved a far better life than the rest. As stated before, Israeli society might have overcome, to a certain extent, its homophobic sentiments, but it still discriminates against women, be they “natural born” women, straight or gay, or men-turned-into-women. As Alisa Solomon has stated, “Zionism’s masculinizing project has been harder to crack than its imperative to male heterosexuality” (160). It is probably their more fragile standing that has allowed women to produce a queer, in the broad sense of the word, critique of the Israeli establishment, in the shape of Dana International; the activities of women’s groups such as Bat Shalom (one of the most active groups in the pro-peace, anti-occupation movement) or Four Mothers (a group of mothers of soldiers who demonstrated against IDF actions in the occupied territories and Lebanon); and, indeed, filmmaking. It is not surprising that *Tel Aviv Stories* was directed by women filmmakers: their film aims to build a different narrative from the dominant Israeli one, an effort not easily detected in many recent (male) gay films. In this sense, *Tel Aviv Stories*, although not dealing directly with gay subjectivity, offers a subversive outlook on Israeli life, giving way to defining non-normative sexual identities.

***Song of the Siren* (Eytan Fox, 1994): Gay Sensibility and the Culture of Consumerism**

Song of the Siren, Eytan Fox’s first feature film, gained unprecedented media attention long before its release in 1994. The film is based on a best-selling novel of the same title, first published in 1991, by Irit Linur. The book has not only sold over 50,000 copies in Israel but it has also been perceived as a landmark in contemporary Hebrew culture, marking the rise of popular “lowbrow” literature as

a legitimate cultural phenomenon. It also depicted a more individualistic and less politically committed society. The film was highly anticipated by audience and critics alike. The result, it seems, disappointed both: the reviews, in most cases, accused Fox of creating a pale imitation of the book and the audience reception was relatively poor. Although the film by no means failed commercially – it attracted over 140,000 viewers – it did not live up to early expectations (Perchak). The film was also ignored in the Israeli Film Academy Awards of that year (Yosha 39). Nevertheless, the film has a special importance in reflecting cultural and social processes in Israeli society at the time, which had a direct link to evolving gay life in Tel Aviv.

Fox, fresh from directing his debut gay-themed short film *Time Off* (*After*, 1990) hoped to approach the novel from a gay perspective. His attempt to write a gay character into the film, however, was blocked by Linur, who also wrote the script. In an interview Fox gave three years after the release of the film, in November 1997, he claimed it was unrealistic to assume there were not any gay men working in an advertising agency based in Tel Aviv (Negev 39).

Despite the absence of gay characters in the film, Fox managed to produce a film that is characterized by a gay sensibility. This comes across in two instances: one is the portrayal of Talila (Dalit Kahn), the main female protagonist, as a single, career-driven, high spending character. The other is Fox's emphasis on design in the excessive *mise-en-scène*, and on consumption at the narrative level. Fox made use of his auteur status in order to undermine the authorship of Linur, the writer. It is interesting to explore the dissonance in the film between the ostensibly heterosexual story and the hints at a different, gay, subtext. Fox's public homosexuality can be assumed to have altered not only his own agenda but also viewers' perception of the film, especially gay viewers who, having seen *Time Off* and read the interviews with Fox in which he discussed his sexuality, were ready to decode the film's gay symbols. The reading of texts from the margins, Orly Lubin argues, may expose and identify hegemonic norms that are positioned in the centre as constructed and artificial (*Women Reading Women* 75). In the case of *Song of the Siren*, the film does not offer an alternative, i.e. an overtly gay narrative, but the reading of the film from a gay perspective enables the consumption of the text without surrendering to its overt system of values. Such a reading, or "act of refusal" as Lubin refers to it (*Women Reading Women*

75), allows a distance from the explicit stance of the film, thus guarding against internalizing its normative values.

Song of the Siren celebrates growing consumer affluence and escapist universalism in Tel Aviv, a tendency that was propelled, in part, by the heightened profile and social mobility of a certain group of urban gay men within the Israeli gay community in the years prior to the release of the book as well as the expansion of Western trends in Israeli society. The process of privatization and the rise of both consumerism and an urban, high-spending gay community are, as Alisa Solomon shows, well connected. Solomon identifies what she calls a “free-market mania” as a principal factor in the emergence of gay consciousness (155).

Throughout his career, Fox has attempted to create crowd-pleasing films by adapting popular Hollywood genres for the Israeli screen. His film *Walk on Water* (2004), for example, is a psychological thriller featuring a *Mossad* secret agent, whose job justifies some high-octane action scenes, while his debut feature film was a light romantic comedy. Unlike Guttman’s dark, expressionistic melodramas, *Song of the Siren* reads as an uncritical adaptation of Hollywood conventions. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* (on November 11, 1994), Fox said: “I wanted it to feel like a musical. I wanted it to have a ‘studio’ look, very colorful, very playful. A romantic comedy that is beautiful, pleasant and has an unabashedly romantic ending” (13). Whereas most Israeli filmmakers choose to deal with “national” themes, mainly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the deprivation of Oriental Jews, or at least refer to them, Fox opted in this case for an allegedly apolitical, anti-artistic, genre film.

Fox’s attempt to follow a Hollywood model in conflict-ridden Israel, a state that lacks a long tradition of filmmaking, is, of course, a political statement in itself.³³ His attempt to create a “standard” romantic comedy, reflecting a “normal” society, without having the infrastructure required for that, was not well received by critics. It is important to note that Fox was not the first Israeli filmmaker who tried to exceed the limits that the local film industry and culture had set him. A group of directors who created “New Wave” cinema in Israel in

³³ The influences of American cinema on Fox’s work can be detected in all of his films (see Chapter 4). Fox, who was born in the United States, tried in the late 1990s to start a career in Hollywood but eventually returned to direct Hebrew-speaking films in Israel (Karpel 40).

the 1960s and 1970s (see also Chapter 3) had set a precedent. In her analysis of the Israeli film industry, published in 1989, Ella Shohat argues that

[t]he situation of cinema in Israel is comparable to that of countries such as Algeria, not only in terms of the challenge of developing ex nihilo a cinematic infrastructure and wresting control of the domestic market from foreign domination, but also in terms of the overall historical evolution of the films themselves, moving from a somewhat idealizing nation-building “mythic” cinema into a more diversified “normal” kind of industry. Yet Israeli filmmakers and critics almost invariably speak, and make films, as if the natural points of reference were to countries with long-developed infrastructures [...] They rarely refer to Third World films or directors, or to the intense debates [...] that have animated Third World film discourse [...] Third World debates linking production strategies, aesthetics, and politics within the search for a dealienating, non-Hollywood mode of filmic discourse have unfortunately had little or no resonance in Israel. (4-5)

However, it is this aspiration that makes *Song of the Siren* an important cultural document. Fox’s cinematic vision is part of a broader tendency to create an alternative to the highly politicized Israeli reality by adopting a “Western” way of life, mainly in Tel Aviv. By the time Irit Linur published her book in 1991, the *mekomonim* had already instilled a whole new local culture, which was more interested in global culture than national politics. *Song of the Siren*, the book, published two years before the production of the film, was an attempt to canonize this culture, to establish it as a valid alternative.

The story takes place at the time of the missile attacks on Israel during the first war on Iraq in 1991. A traumatic event in Israeli cultural memory is described in the book as a surreal background to the romantic actions and caprices of the characters. Talila, the heroine, a cynical advertising agent who lives in Tel Aviv, reveals an incredible ignorance about the war and refuses to believe that Scud missiles will ever land on the city. Even after being proven wrong, she still cannot take the threat as seriously as one might expect her to. Through her eyes the war seems to be no more than material for a comic gag, a perception that undermines the serious state of alertness Israel was in at the time. Distracted by her love life, the protagonist refuses to let the national agenda interfere with her private life. In so doing, she defies the hitherto prevalent tendency to give “national”, “militaristic” and “security” causes top priority. This should be read as

a broader critique of Israel's tendency to push aside civil issues in the name of state security. As Tracy Moore has pointed out, "[b]ecause security is accepted as the primary duty of government, the military agenda had been allowed to monopolize resources while subordinating or sweeping aside issues such as women's rights, civil rights and economic development" (7).

In the course of the war Talila falls in love with Noah (Boaz Gur-Lavi), a food engineer who lives in Mazkeret Batia, a small, pastoral, village-like community. They lead dramatically different lives: Talila represents a post-feminist, confident and financially independent woman who lives in the city and enjoys a life of luxury. I would like to argue that her character is partly shaped by the model of the post-Stonewall, successful gay man. Her urban, career-minded life, without family commitments, represents the experience of many well-off gay men. This economic prosperity is a result of a shift in the status of gay men in Israel, as well as in other parts of the Western world. Noah, on the other hand, represents the stereotypical all-Israeli heterosexual man, with his plain, modest way of living, his vocation and neglected appearance. As such, he finds himself completely out of place in Talila's universe. The film attempts to describe a clash between two traditions in Israeli reality of the early 1990s: on the one hand, the ever-growing consumer culture in Tel Aviv and other wealthy areas in Israel, and on the other, the more modest way of life, reminiscent of the Zionist ideal. Of all the characters in the film, Noah is the only one called up into the army. By doing his reserve duty, even in a non-combat unit, Noah's character is portrayed as one who participates fully in Israeli life, as opposed to the Tel Aviv crowd, a group of hedonistic, career- and money-driven professionals.

Despite the film's flat characterization, it captures a certain shift in Israeli society, namely the construction of an escapist, hedonistic culture, which is defined by and based upon consumerism. The film begins with a short series of shots showing shop window displays, long aisles in a large, neon-lit supermarket, and crowded cafés. Similarly, Talila's feelings for Noah are expressed by exchanging goods: she buys him new clothes. The majority of scenes in the film take place on elaborate sets. In his interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Fox said: "I didn't want the film to focus overly on image, but the element of how things appear is very important to these people's lives. They are slaves of fashion and design. They work in the field, they enjoy it, and it even acts as a substitute for



Fig. 2.3 Talila (Dalit Kahn) in *Song of the Siren*. From www.sfjff.org/images/1995SIRE.jpg.

For the second episode in

early production in 1911 in the

Reproduced from 2007

other things missing in their lives” (13). The film is full of brand names, and as one review commented, even the Israeli flag, usually a contested symbol in Israeli cinema, is seen in the frame numerous times, like the American flag in Hollywood films, as if it were just another logo (Raveh). Its presence, however, does not invite further debate, as the film does not engage with politics: it is simply there.

The ever-growing process of consumerism in 1990s Israeli society has influenced the way different identities have been shaped and defined. In the gay arena, the power of consumerism is of special importance. For some gay men, it seems, consumerism has replaced revolt and protest as a means of achieving social mobility. This, of course, does not apply to every gay man or lesbian: not all members of the “imagined” gay community are middle-class, professional and urban. In America, as Michael Bronski argues, gay men and lesbians come from very different, varied backgrounds, geographically, ethnically and economically (177-78). The same can be said about the Israeli gay community (some of the documentary films discussed in Chapter 5 explore different identities within Israeli gay society, based on different ethnic, socio-economic and gender identifications). It might be more accurate to discuss two types of gay “communities”. One is expansive, and as such aims to include as many gay men and lesbians, not only those who correspond to the image of the gay community as it has been portrayed in the media. The other is a highly visible, although restricted, group of mostly Ashkenazi professional gay men. This is the group Eytan Fox belongs to, and to which he mostly refers in his films.

Although gay men and lesbians are not all urban high-spenders, their image as consumption-oriented bears a special political significance. One of the reasons for this, Bronski suggests, is the strong link between financial independence and personal freedom: “images of upwardly mobile, financially comfortable gay men are comforting to gay men who have made it as well as to gay men who want to make it, hoping for some relief from daily homophobia. This ‘liberation by acquisition’ philosophy is embodied not only in advertising but in the plots of many gay novels” (179). Bronski has stated: “[n]ew ideas – gay liberation, youth culture, feminism – do not exist on an intellectual plane alone. To remain in the public imagination, they must be popularized by the consumer aspects of our culture. Here they are depicted as part of everyday life [...] The

commercialization of a subculture is one way to promote the assimilation of that culture into the mainstream” (176-77).

According to Alexandra Chasin, the formation of a national gay community in the United States in the 1990s owed much to “the spread of print capitalism among gay men and lesbians, that is, to the growth of a national commercial gay and lesbian press” (101). Chasin has further argued that “advertising to gay men and lesbians has often promised that full inclusion in the national community of Americans is available through personal consumption [...] consumption has been held out as a route to political and social enfranchisement” (101). As *Song of the Siren* shows, in Israel, as in the United States, consumption and financial independence, enjoyed by formerly disenfranchised groups, such as gay men and gay or heterosexual women, have facilitated the social mobility of these groups.

Jean Baudrillard sees consumption as a language, a system that goes beyond discourses of needs or pleasures. Pleasure, Baudrillard points out, is no longer the sole object behind consumption. Rather, consumption is the basis of a new communication network between consumers:

[c]onsumption is a system which assures the regulation of signs and the integration of the group: it is simultaneously a morality (a system of ideological values) and a system of communication, a structure of exchange ... Although we experience pleasure for ourselves, when we consume we never do it on our own ... Consumers are mutually implicated, despite themselves, in a general system of exchange and in the production of coded values. (46)

Song of the Siren demonstrates how this new system of codes and values has replaced the old, socialist-Zionist system.

Paradoxically, *Song of the Siren* celebrates an Israeli version of Western urban gay sensibility, without actually including a gay character in the plot. But if gay men are absent from the film, heterosexual men appear to be “queered” by the filmmaker. The urban male characters in the film take on the traditional roles gay men have performed in society, namely bending the rigid boundaries of gender and sexuality. If gay men are often seen as “naturally” inclined to appropriate what are perceived as “feminine” interests, it is the profession, as well as urban setting and social status, of the heterosexual characters that allows them to define

a new kind of masculinity, based on consumerism and self-indulgence as symbols of individualistic society.

It is not accidental that the story partly takes place in an advertising agency, whose role is to prettify reality and sell goods. Tracing the influence of the advertising industry on post-war Britain, Frank Mort writes:

[t]he rhetoric of commercial dynamism made particular sense for creatives, as it did for the style leaders, because it reinforced a notion of themselves as professionals who were at the cutting edge of cultural as well as artistic change. A liberalised stance on masculinity [...] fitted comfortably with their vision of a modern and vigorous entrepreneurial culture. (118)

Part of the expansion of Israeli consumer culture is the creation of more daring and imaginative models of masculinity, often in sharp contrast with traditional values such as militarism and heterosexism (consumer culture is also a reaction to the socialist values, such as asceticism, which Israeli society was built upon). *Song of the Siren* presents, through two of the male heterosexual characters (as I will show below), a new, hybrid masculinity, which blurs the boundaries of fixed definitions of gender, allowing, for instance, heterosexual men to dress and act as if they were gay men, borrowing their unique “sensibility”. Michael Bronski finds gay sensibility an alternative that appeals to many members of heterosexual society:

[a]lthough homosexuality and homosexual behavior have been uniformly attacked and derided by Western society because of their promise of freedom from the bonds of gender, they have managed nevertheless to present an attractive, if forbidden, alternative to people. This is especially true of the trappings of gay sensibility rather than homosexuality itself. The creation of a ‘gay lifestyle’ was a perfect way to channel these mainstream cultural fantasies. (186)

As a concept, the use of “gay sensibility” outside the gay world has had far-reaching implications on the advertising, marketing and fashion industries as well as in the arena of sexual politics. In his analysis of masculinities and social space in contemporary Britain, Frank Mort has argued that

[f]or progressive men, working in anti-sexist organizations and consciousness-raising groups, the growing concern over masculinity, however confused and chaotic, was to be supported. It was viewed as the culmination of a series of much broader initiatives, which were breaking open masculinity's best-kept secret; forcing men to look self-consciously at themselves and their identities, rather than as the concealed norm of power and privilege. (17)

Two characters in the film best portray this new revolutionized Israeli masculinity. Ofer (Yair Lapid) is a successful advertising agent from a rival office, who abandons Talila after two years of living together but ends up proposing marriage to her. Talila rejects his proposal, claiming she cannot marry a person whose life looks like a lifestyle magazine. This remark is not accidental: Mort sees the invention of lifestyle magazines, for men in particular, as the epitome of consumer culture, which gave birth to this new type of man (18). Talila refuses to marry Ofer because he has never told her he loved her, but instead told her "how to dress, how to do my hair, what coffee to drink and where to eat", replacing intimacy with a list of consumer goods.

Ronen Marko (Charlie Buzaglo) is Talila's boss, who left Israel for Amsterdam just before the war broke out because he was afraid of what was to come. He is portrayed as an obsessive shopper "who is afraid the missiles will ruin his 500 dollar shoes", as Talila claims. These two men, although heterosexual, act in a narcissistic and allegedly "feminine" or "gay" manner (their love of beautiful things, their cowardice and their difficulty in making a commitment are traits stereotypically attributed to gay men). They also fulfill the stereotype of gay men by obsessing over their looks. Like gay men, they seem to be left outside collective Israeli society, seduced instead by Western trends. Whereas Noah is portrayed as a modern version of the muscular Jewish pioneer or the patriotic Israeli fighter, both Ofer and Ronen, as well as Talila before she meets Noah, are portrayed as his opposite: rootless Israelis, alienated from Israeli reality and culture, and reluctant to contribute to the national cause. Instead, they are part of a new global civil religion, the religion of consumerism and accumulation of goods.

The subversive element in both the book and the film is that none of the three really cares about their dissociation from Israeli reality. Unlike the core of the gay community that sought integration with and approval of the

heteronormative majority, the Tel Aviv-based characters in *Song of the Siren* do not seek to be included in the Israeli collective but rather create for themselves an alternative sphere in the city. When Talila tells one of her colleagues about her visit to her father's house in Petach Tikva (a provincial town east of Tel Aviv, and one of the first Zionist settlements in Palestine, established in the late nineteenth century) he says: "I heard people went mad since the war broke out, but Petach Tikva?" Similarly, Talila asks herself where Mazkeret Batia is when she is first invited to Noah's place, and refuses to go to Jerusalem with her family (many residents of Tel Aviv left for the capital during the war believing it was safer), stating she would prefer to suffer a missile attack to leaving Tel Aviv.

Although the film is in tune with current urban trends in Tel Aviv (which are influenced by global ones), its tone is satirical. Instead of celebrating a secular, urban and less politically engaged group of people, it depicts them as complacent and out of touch with reality. This is emphasized by the construction of a Tel Aviv/Mazkeret-Batia (city/country) binary. Whereas Ofer and Talila represent the universal city and its false, dangerous charms, Noah represents the local Israeli-Zionist settlement life and values. He is more "real" than Ofer, who is merely portrayed as a two-dimensional cardboard model from a lifestyle magazine. Noah can offer Talila what Ofer will never have: real emotions. In the end Talila does choose him, and turns her back, symbolically at least, on her former life. As much as the film comes to validate a less nationalist, politicized life in Israel, its creators do preach, to a certain extent, a return to the old Zionist values.

Despite this confusion, the film has a special importance in depicting a defining cultural, unequivocally urban, moment in Israeli society of the early 1990s and its link to the evolving gay culture at the time. Fox dealt with gay themes in later projects and chose, as he did in *Song of the Siren*, to do so through Hollywood-style, commercialized work frames. He used Tel Aviv for his TV series *Florentine* (1997), in which he depicted the life of a group of young men and women in their twenties, two of whom are gay, who have moved to the city from Jerusalem. As in *Crows*, Tel Aviv is described as a sanctuary, especially for gay men, a city in which they are free to explore their sexuality and to engage in same-sex relationships.

The limited success of *Song of the Siren* did not stop Fox from becoming a prolific director. All of his projects after his debut film were concerned with gay

themes. However, as much as his work assisted in expanding a gay discourse, it did so from a narrow, limited perspective. It is striking, therefore, that his first feature film was more radical in his sexual politics than any of his later films. I shall offer an extensive analysis of the shortfalls in Fox's cinematic view of modern Israeli gay identity in Chapter 4.

Reel Dystopia: The Enemy Within in *Life According to Agfa* (Assi Dayan, 1992) and *Amazing Grace* (Amos Guttman, 1992)

The scene that ends Assi Dayan's film *Life According to Agfa* (*Hachayim Al Pi Agfa*, 1992), has become an instant classic, almost iconic: shot in minimalist black and white, it shows a wounded Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) officer and his fellow soldiers bursting into the Tel Aviv bar from which they had been thrown out. Motivated by blind rage they open fire, killing a handful of people, among them the bohemian owner of the pub, the waitresses, the Arab cooks and a group of hotheaded Oriental Jews. It is an operatic scene, meticulously designed and crafted, which manages to disturb despite its deliberate stylization and artificialness. It is the lack of reason that shocks the spectator the most. The scene shows random killing, which seems out of place despite the violence expressed throughout the film and the actions that allegedly provoke and lead to it. These are IDF soldiers who slaughter their fellow Israeli citizens. And this is a bar in Tel Aviv, historically a secular metropolis, which at the time the film was made was still seen as an unashamedly and unapologetically hedonistic haven from the fighting, scarcely disturbed by Israel's endless wars.

It is important to note that the film was produced before the phenomenon of suicide bombers became commonplace in the life of the city and Israel as a whole, so this could not have been a factor in the making of the film. It is more likely that the film addressed dormant fears of apocalyptic ending, which were evoked by the 1991 Gulf War, a war in which Tel Aviv was, for the very first time, a primary target (a threat which was hardly conveyed in *Song of the Siren* [1994]).

However, the seeds of these apocalyptic images were sown long before, in Israeli cinema of the 1980s, in which expressions of nihilism, portrayal of

conflicts and terrorism, a fear of religious fundamentalism, an increasing interest in the Holocaust and the threat of AIDS all proposed a darker flipside to Zionist utopia. This concern reached its peak in the early 1990s with films like *Life According to Agfa* and in conjunction with Western postmodern concerns. As Judd Ne'emna argues, "[t]he vision of Israel's apocalyptic predicament relies not only on a Jewish instinct but also feeds upon a postmodern feature" (117).

This concluding section explores the nature of apocalypse and dystopia in both *Life According to Agfa* and *Amazing Grace* (*Chesed Mufla*), the last film directed by Amos Guttman, also released in 1992. It focuses on the ways in which the cinematic representations of the city of Tel Aviv convey the apocalyptic mode, which the films create. Both films mark the city as a site in which new identifications, based on a new, chaotic, social order, replace old Zionist symbols. Diseased gay men, Arabs and unhinged army soldiers claim their place in Israeli society after long years on its margins. The fact that they form hate groups among themselves attests to the failure of the Zionist regime in creating an inclusive, tolerant society. This failure culminates in scenes, and themes, of total destruction: massacre in *Life According to Agfa* and AIDS in *Amazing Grace*.

While *Amazing Grace* is both a gay-themed and gay-authored film, *Life According to Agfa* is neither. Yet, both films portray a darker phase in the life of the city in the early 1990s, time which was marked by war that Israel could not possibly control, with missiles targeted at Tel Aviv, and the AIDS epidemic which, although not as prevalent in Israel as in the West, affected gay men and their standing in Israeli society.³⁴ Above all, both films showed little, if any, respect for once sacred Zionist and Israeli symbols – particularly the army – undermining their influence on culture. By doing so, they revealed alternative, less "wholesome", modes of existence, one of which was gay.

Both films show a nocturnal, decadent city, a generator of an "End of Days" narrative. The city in the films is a city of seedy bars, violent acts and disease, a dramatically different portrait from the modernist vision of the White City, a name given to Tel Aviv in the 1930s because of its distinctive International

³⁴ Amit Kama argues that "AIDS has been scarcely discussed even within the gay community. The strategic ignorance evolved out of the perceived menace of further stigmatization of gay men [...] To be sure, the vast social, economic, political, and moral [...] implications and ramifications of the pandemic in other Western countries (especially, the USA) have not been felt in Israel" ("From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*" 138).

Style architecture. It is different also from the placid, European feel of the city in Israeli New Wave cinema of the 1960s or the permissive, carefree Tel Aviv in Uri Zohar's films of the 1970s. By the 1980s the cinematic representations of Tel Aviv had long since degraded into dystopian projections. The openness and dynamism depicted in previous films, such as Zohar's *Peeping Toms* (1972), which mostly takes place on the city's beaches, or Judd Ne'eman's *The Dress* (1969), were replaced by demarcated, claustrophobic interiors, mainly flats and bars. Even the parks, which are featured in Guttman's films as cruising grounds, are rendered darkened mazes.

Many of the films of the 1990s show a hardening of the urban surface, which served as an emblem of increasingly restricted social boundaries. In *Life According to Agfa* there is a curfew imposed on Israeli Arabs, from which Samir (Akram Tabwi), the wounded cook, can only barely escape. When Daniela (Smadar Kalchinsky), the drug addict waitress, celebrates the visa she has obtained, which allows her to leave Israel for the US, Samir bitterly comments: "I got a visa to enter Tel Aviv". Fourteen years after the release of the film, Dayan's dire prediction has become more relevant than ever before. In the wake of the second Palestinian Intifada and the long series of terror attacks in the city and beyond, Tel Aviv, like the rest of Israel, has become something of a "fortress city".

Amos Guttman's and Assi Dayan's Tel Aviv is a diseased city, and is conceived as an allegory for the decline of Zionism within which existing connections between modernity and collective ideas of social progress have become unraveled. The films present a certain perspective in Israeli discourse. In both, the unified front of the Zionist utopia is long gone, and the romantic ideals of "futurism" and "progress", which stood at the heart of the first Hebrew city, have deteriorated to a depiction of death and madness. Ricky (Avital Diker), a troubled young woman in *Life According to Agfa*, sums up the accelerated process of decay by saying, a short while before she jumps to her death: "this city has a sour smell, as if something went bad, like one huge quarrel".

Life According to Agfa marks the loss of boundaries and sense, it is a film in which the city is a battleground and the enemy is the Israeli soldiers themselves who betray their role as defenders of Israeli society. The traditional positions of enemy and innocent victim, the Palestinian and the Israeli soldier respectively, are

constantly reversed in the film. Nimi (Sharon Alexander), The IDF colonel, was wounded during a military operation the night before the film opens; it is possible that Samir, who appears in the bar with a bandage on his face, was wounded in that same operation, but it is Samir with whom the spectators identify. He makes up different stories every time he is asked about his injury. First he says it happened while he was having “a small political argument”, then says it was a result of a violent fight with Jews after a football match and finally gives the following surreal explanation: “the cross in the church fell on me, so the messiah’s thorn got stuck in my head”. His changing versions of what caused his injury put the viewers in an uncomfortable position of confusion. Samir’s injury, as well as the curfew that was imposed on Arab villages, is portrayed as unjustified by introducing us to the corrupt and dangerous character of the army colonel, who is one of the key decision-makers in the Israeli arena. As Daliah (Gila Almagor), the bar owner, tells Samir: “I read that Zionism is the edgiest movement in history, so take care”. It is an unusual point of view in Israeli discourse, in which Jews are traditionally portrayed as sensible and modernized whereas Arabs are considered primitive and barbaric.

This reversal takes on a more profound meaning when one considers the director Assi Dayan’s public persona and familial relations. As Yosefa Loshitzky has observed, the filmmaker and actor, whose father was the legendary general and politician Moshe Dayan,

personified in his early cinematic roles [...] the ultimate Sabra [...] Nevertheless, Dayan’s troubled personal life, the many public scandals in which he has been involved, and his later career as a filmmaker highly critical of Israeli society and its myths, transformed his image from an affirmation of the ultimate idolized Sabra to its negation. If in the beginning of his filmic career Dayan played the idealized Ashkenazi, leftist Sabra then in his later career as a film director he portrayed the grotesque inversion of this Sabra. (“A Tale of Three Cities” 139)

The patrons of the bar – called Barbie, after Abarbanel, an infamous Israeli institution for the mentally ill³⁵ – are prophets of a new apocalypse. The massacre does not distinguish between Jews or Arabs, between Ashkenazi or Oriental.

³⁵ The comic reference to the plastic doll is present as well, of course, making a point about the bar’s patrons’ unwholesomeness, as opposed to the wholesomeness that the American toy comes to represent.



Fig. 2.4 Nimi (Sharon Alexander) and Ricky (Avital Diker) in *Life According to Agfa*.
Reproduced from Schnitzer.

Ancient apocalypses, both in Jewish and Christian traditions, as Jonathan Boyarin has observed, included an aspect of judgment leading to reward and punishment (43). The postmodern apocalypse, which is at the heart of the film, on the other hand, is endtime-without-judgment.

Life According to Agfa does not aim to be realistic. Rather, it is a film that invites a constant reflection on its medium. It is shot mainly in black and white apart from the last sequence in which Tel Aviv is seen in washed-out colours, a sequence that only further emphasizes the artistic use of black and white photography in the rest of the film. Key moments are also captured, as the title suggests, on an Agfa film by Liora (Irit Frank), the bartender who is also an amateur photographer. The still photographs that she takes, shown as brief freeze-frame shots, call our attention to the art of representation. This is not life that we see on the screen; this is merely life according to Agfa. Dayan's insistence on exposing the viewers to the mechanism of filmmaking disrupts the flow of the cinematic illusion, by constantly underlining the apparatus and its ideological concerns. These disruptions in the moving image can be seen as metaphors for the disruptions that have punctured Zionist ideology and made it collapse.

The film shows the physical and psychological disintegration of the characters: One of them is dying of cancer; Daniela is a drug addict, who gives up her future in order to sustain her habit; Ricky commits suicide after having soulless sex with Benny (Shuli Rand), a police officer she encounters in the bar. Having been clinically depressed since giving birth, the young blond, an incarnation of a Barbie doll with a spoiled mind, is looking for company in order to save herself from herself. But the sex act only accelerates the process of her self-annihilation.

Like *Life According to Agfa*, *Amazing Grace* centers on an apocalyptic vision, namely the devastating effect of the AIDS epidemic. The motif of sex as a self-destructive act is repeated in the film, in which 18-year old Yonatan (Gal Hoyberger) falls in love with HIV-positive Thomas (Sharon Alexander, who played the IDF colonel in *Life According to Agfa*). Through its overt queerness and the portrayal of a group of people who defiantly refuse to fit in the Israeli-Zionist matrix, Guttman, like Dayan, aims at unraveling the modernist narrative of Zionism. Like Dayan, Guttman offers a subversive order, in which day is replaced by night, life by death, reason by unreason.

In her book *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag examined the way in which the virus was imagined in popular culture.³⁶ She depicts the virus as an invader that “takes up permanent residence, by a form of alien takeover familiar in science-fiction narratives. The body’s own cells *become* the invader” (18). Drawing on this idea, Monica B. Pearl has described the HIV retrovirus as a postmodern virus, a virus that does not succumb to a coherent narrative, by making the body “unable to differentiate between itself and what is external, or foreign, to itself” (24). The way a retrovirus acts, argues Pearl, “does not follow the ‘traditional’ trajectory of infection, whereby a foreign substance infects the body and is ‘conquered’ by an army of antibodies, rather it insidiously convinces the body that its very being is the foreign substance, and so the body fights itself” (24). I would like to suggest that this virus is an adequate metaphor of the postmodern condition in which Israeli society found itself in the early 1990s. As the two films in question show, this is a society so polarized and torn from within that it threatens to destroy itself. In neither film is an external enemy present. The apocalyptic ending in *Life According to Agfa* is a result of a clash between hate-groups, which were all, initially, taking part in the same utopian vision of the Zionist movement. Similarly, *Amazing Grace* argues for the lack of empathy even in places one would most expect to find it. Depicting the gay community in Tel Aviv as a microcosm of Israeli society, Guttman shows a reality in which envy, strife and violence dictate the ways one character treats another. This is powerfully conveyed in the bar scene in the film, in which the harsh sexual economy of the gay community and its violent side effects are explored.

For both filmmakers, the city of Tel Aviv is both a symbol and a consequence of vanishing Zionist values. In her analysis of Amos Gitai’s 1995 film *Past Continuous* (*Zichron Dvarim*), another film that reinforces the connection between the disintegration of the Zionist dream and the decadent city, Loshitzky argues that

Tel Aviv’s corrupted body [...] signifies the end of old-style socialist Zionism [...] Death and sterility dominate the life of the film’s characters,

³⁶ The book was published in 1989. Progress in medical research and the way the disease is described in the media has obviously influenced the discourse around AIDS. Yet many of Sontag’s observations regarding people’s perception of AIDS still seem valid in contemporary Western culture.

whose compulsive obsessions with sex result in unwanted pregnancies, children suffering from a lack of fatherly attention, and terminal illness. There is no promise of continuity, or at least of a continuing healthy life, which, after all, was the original promise of Zionism, as well as of Tel Aviv's founders. ("A Tale of Three Cities" 138)

Amazing Grace and *Life According to Agfa*, as well as *Past Continuous*, are often included within a larger group of films, made in the 1980s and 1990s, which explore Israeli urban experience. These films offer a counter-image to the chronological, linear, progressive and phallogentric nature of Zionism, by bringing this so-called progression to a halt.³⁷ Amos Guttman's early films *Drifting* (1983) and *Bar 51* (1986) portray the city as the ultimate haven, even if claustrophobic, for "misfits" marginalized by heteronormative Israeli society. The marginality of Guttman's characters is expressed not only through their actions but also through the depiction of the spaces that they inhabit. Thus, the city comes across as decayed and dark, a complete contrast to the "beautiful and blooming land of Israel" of the famous Zionist folk song (see also Chapter 3). This song is featured in both of the above-mentioned films and serves as an ironic comment on the unbridgeable chasm between the reality of Guttman's protagonists and that of the members of "first Zionist Israel". This use of folk songs, which generally praise Jewish combat bravery, is also a prominent feature of *Life According to Agfa*. It is the army colonel and the policeman, the dubious figures of authority, who usually start singing to themselves. One of the most mesmerizing scenes in the film is one in which the young woman commits suicide while the policeman takes a shower and sings in the bathroom. This scene, as well as others, demonstrates the hollowness of these songs and the message they carry. All that is left of the larger-than-life ideals of the Zionist past are the rituals, the uniforms and the patriotic lyrics.

³⁷ In *Shuru* (Sabi Gabizon, 1992), a film which offers a comic, satiric take on the spreading phenomenon of spiritual cults in 1990s Tel Aviv, the city is a site in which the Zionist movement has terminally, as well as literally, "lost its way". In one of the key scenes in the film, in which the members of a communal singing group – mostly identified with the Zionist, and particularly the *kibbutz*, ethos – are lost in the city, asking for the assistance of locals, who are themselves in the midst of some sort of spiritual search, to find their way back to the bus that brought them there. According to Kronish and Safirman, "[t]he members of the choir, lost in the night, are all dressed in pure white, like angelic messengers of the socialist dream of the 'lost' pioneering generation" (127). The space left by the "disappearance" of the Zionist dream is filled by shady, pseudo-spiritual, pseudo-intellectual alternatives (such as the movement that the protagonist, a loser conman (Moshe Ivgi), establishes: a movement whose members believe that acting like "idiots" will bring them salvation).

The city of Tel Aviv has epitomized the Zionist dream since 1909. The ideological foundations on which the city is based represent the Zionist wish for a Jewish sovereignty in a modern, utopian city. Tel Aviv has adopted an image of a city without a past, a counter-image to Jerusalem. Tel Aviv has long since fashioned itself as the ultimate space of secularism, liberalism and progress. But when the first cracks in the Zionist-Israeli master-narrative started to appear, Tel Aviv, through its representations in the arts, and particularly in film, was quick to reflect these changes. In a series of films made in the 1980s and 1990s Tel Aviv served as the most telling cultural “barometer” of the dying utopian Zionist narrative. The return of the city to its near past through UNESCO’s recognition of the “White City” in Tel Aviv as a world heritage site in 2003 expresses the longing for the lost promise of modernism. Tel Aviv is now looking to its past in order to believe in its future once more.

Chapter 3

Melodrama, Decadence and Death in Amos Guttman's Cinema

Amos Guttman, who died of AIDS-related illness in February 1993, was the first Israeli director to portray gay reality in his films. Guttman's pioneering cinema, which confronted the issue of homosexuality in the militantly homophobic Israeli society of the late 1970s and early 1980s, has secured him a special standing in Israeli culture through the controversy it has often provoked. With their unapologetic approach and expressionistic visuals, the films promoted gay concerns that had been mostly overlooked by the "official" gay movement, represented by *Agudah*, up until then.

Guttman directed three short films – *Repeat Premieres* (*Premierot Chozrot*, 1976), *A Safe Place* (*Makom Batu'ach*, 1977) and *Drifting* (*Nagua*, 1979). *Nagua* was also the title Guttman chose for his first feature film of 1983. Three other feature films followed: *Bar 51* (1986), *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* (*Himmo, Melech Yerushalyim*, 1987) and *Amazing Grace* (*Chesed Mufla*, 1992). Almost all of his films deal explicitly with gay life in Israel and serve also as an autobiographical statement about growing up gay (mainly in the first two short films), about his life as a gay filmmaker, about being excluded from society and bearing a mark of difference, and about his HIV status. Guttman's cinema brings out the ambiguity and uncertainty that are part of the process of constructing a gay identity in a hostile environment. His films, therefore, express a sense of pride even though they are also saturated with self-loathing. This dialectical tension constitutes a central theme in Guttman's work and will be explored closely in this chapter.

Guttman was the first filmmaker to give Israeli gay men a voice of their own, but his dark, some would even say homophobic, films isolated him from the mainstream gay and lesbian group and its main organization, *Agudah*. It is not only Guttman's distinctive artistic vision that captured Israeli culture and society at the time the films were made; the reception of his films by gay men and

lesbians also attested to the difficulties members of the community were faced with when looking for ways to represent themselves on the screen and beyond.

Guttman entitled both his last short film and his first feature *Nagua* (“infected”, “diseased” or “contaminated” in Hebrew), long before the devastating effect of the AIDS epidemic became widely known. In light of his death from AIDS-related illness, this choice of title may be perceived as an irony of fate but also as an attempt to emphasize his view of gay life as an alternative to the image of “healthy”, wholesome life that Zionist and Israeli mainstream cultures tried to promote. American gay filmmaker Todd Haynes described the use of metaphors of disease in his films (such as anorexia in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987) “as a kind of resistance to notions of healthy identities and selves” (Taubin, “Nowhere to Hide” 104). For Guttman, like Haynes, the “diseased” or corrupt body and soul of his gay characters were an alternative to hegemonic culture. But it was not mere rhetoric: Guttman, I argue, actually perceived gay existence as a tragic, doomed experience.

Even without referring to the disease (unheard of at the time the short *Nagua* was made) the two films, especially the feature version, are marked by undeniable gloom and despair. This tone became more pronounced in Guttman’s later films. All of Guttman’s feature films, apart from *Drifting*, end with the death of one of the characters. In the final scene of *Bar 51* Thomas (Juliano Merr) dies – it is not clear whether he commits suicide, is accidentally hurt by a drawn knife, or is killed by his sister, Marianna (Smadar Kalchinsky) – after realizing that he has lost his sister, with whom he has had a sexual relationship, to her American lover. In *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* Hamutal (Alona Kimchi) gives a lethal injection to the title character (Ofer Shikartzi) as an act of euthanasia. And in *Amazing Grace*, Helen (Hina Rozovska), the grandmother of Thomas (Sharon Alexander), dies after a long disease, just as Thomas, who is HIV-positive, is going back to New York. Even the fate of Yonatan (Gal Hoyberger), Helen’s young neighbour, with whom Thomas had sex before leaving, is darkened, since Thomas was already infected. Like Rainer Werner Fassbinder before him, Guttman has made the human, in particular the male, body, “the point at which economic, racial, and sexual oppression are registered” (Silverman 154). Guttman’s obsession with disease, death and the deterioration of the body implies

at once the pain inflicted on gay men and the resistance of those who live outside the tradition of the ruling powers.

Focusing on this particular aspect of Guttman's cinema, Raz Yosef has devoted most of his analysis of Guttman's films to establishing a link between the director's work and Leo Bersani's concept of gay sex as a wish for self-annihilation. Yosef sees Guttman's films as a perfect case study for Bersani's theory:

[i]n Guttman's films, fantasies of power and control give way, in anticipatory excitement or in the orgasmic shattering of the body, to degrading self-abolition. Representations of sex emphasize the sexual act as a symbolic embodiment of abdication of mastery, of a desire to abandon the 'self' in favor of communicating with what Bersani calls "'lower' orders of being." Tragically, AIDS literalized this phantasmatic potential of gay sex as an actual death. (*Beyond Flesh* 149)

Whereas in his previous films Guttman chose to show explicit harsh sex scenes, in his last film, whose protagonist is dying of AIDS, tenderness becomes part of the sexual act. The scene in which Thomas and Yonatan kiss towards the end of the film replaces sexual aggression with affection. The effect of this gesture, however, only illuminates Guttman's usual themes. The first kiss in his movies is also the last, while death and "self-abolition" still rule. In one of the scenes in *Amazing Grace*, which takes place in a seedy gay bar, a bartender tells one of the customers: "I lost eleven friends in the last two years, a whole ward". The customer corrects him: "twelve: Sylvian is also dying".

Bars play a central role as settings in Guttman's films. They encapsulate the essence of gay life as Guttman perceived it: decadent, lonely and cold. The scene from *Amazing Grace* mentioned above ends with a violent fight, depicting bars, especially gay bars – metaphorically representing the gay world – as places of danger and hatred. This scene refers to Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982), on which Armond White writes:

Querelle's setting [...] re-imagines sexual history – it's a psychodramatic representation of the space in which gay male dreams are enacted, an outsized vision of the bar and danceclub where the performance of gay fantasy is permitted and encouraged [...] the world of *Querelle* is a fantasy construct that highlights desire and sexual availability while also incorporating the harsh truths of competition, envy and strife. (23)

Guttman directed his first feature film a short time after Fassbinder finished directing his last. Both Fassbinder and Guttman, who was heavily influenced by the former, had similar visions of gay reality, namely that even in a post-Stonewall era it has yet to take part in a real social integration. The interior compositions in both directors' films are symbols of what White calls a "ghettoized environment" (23). The similarity with Fassbinder, and also with Douglas Sirk, his favourite filmmaker, does not end there, as I will show below.

As much as Guttman's films are indeed a fierce critique of both the gay and lesbian community and Israeli mainstream culture, they also express a wish to belong. Reading Guttman's films as autobiographical documents, one cannot ignore his powerful desire to be accepted: as a gay man by his family, not only his nuclear one, but also the bigger Israeli "family", and, as a filmmaker, by the establishment. In *Amos Guttman, Film Director* (*Amos Guttman: Bi'mai Kolnoa*, Ran Kotzer, 1997), a documentary made after his death, friends and peers tell of Guttman's despair following the commercial and critical failure of *Himmo, King of Jerusalem*. After it, he took a five-year break from filmmaking. He felt the same disappointment at not receiving the Israeli Film Academy award, the Israeli "Oscar", for *Amazing Grace*, a short time before his death.

As *Amos Guttman, Film Director* shows, the protagonists in Guttman's films are reflections of himself, both in their eagerness to break invisible boundaries and in their failure to do so. Moreover, the actors who play them remind us, through their own personal life stories and struggles, of Guttman's life: for example, the otherness of Juliano Merr, half Arab, half Jewish, or the secret past of Ada Valerie Tal, who starred in three of Guttman's feature films and who was revealed to be a transsexual only after her death.³⁸ Guttman was a sexual and cultural misfit, a Hungarian-born among native Israelis and a gay man in a society that revered machismo. Like the characters he wrote himself into, and some of the actors who brought them to life, Guttman felt cursed, doomed, *nagua*.

³⁸ Tal was the first man in Israel to undergo a sex change operation in 1970 (Yodelevitch). It was not only her sexual otherness that made Tal Guttman's favourite actress. Being a Romanian migrant, who had trouble adjusting to life in the Levant, Tal, who spoke in a distinctive heavily-accented Hebrew, dotted with phrases in English and Romanian, echoed Guttman's own experiences.



Fig. 3.1 Amos Guttman. From <http://www.gayart.info/ran.htm>.



Fig. 3.2 Robby (Yonatan Segal) in the long version of *Drifting*.
Reproduced from Schnitzer.

This chapter examines Guttman's cinema as a response to and a critique of Israeli society and culture between the late 1970s and early 1990s. I shall trace the cultural and cinematic influences in the films, both local and global, as well as contextualize them in the wider nexus of minority discourses and identity politics. This will raise further questions regarding the possibility of challenging nationalist narratives through subversive cultural practices, in order to shape cultural and sexual mores.

Departure Point: The Israeli "Personal Cinema" Movement

As much as Guttman deserves his pioneering status, his films could not have been made without the precedent set by earlier "personal" Israeli films. In many ways, Guttman's films are reminiscent of the "personal cinema" movement, which started in the 1960s as a reaction to the heroic-nationalist and *Bourekas* films that dominated Israeli cinema at the time. Ella Shohat comments on Uri Zohar and fellow "personal cinema" directors from the 1960s: "These filmmakers generated a kind of thematic and stylistic paradigm for the personal films of the seventies and eighties, gradually forming a major movement within Israeli cinema, one generally supported by a sympathetic film-critical apparatus" (181). According to Shohat, personal films in the 1980s "achieved relative dominance, amounting, at times, to almost half of film production" (183). The dominance of personal films was also the result of the inauguration of new film institutes, among them the film department at Beit Tzvi school, where Guttman was first a student and later a teacher. Guttman's short films were produced as projects for the school, which also supported him in the making of some of his feature films.

The early "personal cinema" was heavily influenced, in both its aesthetics and themes, by French New Wave films. Filmmakers were characterized by their aspiration to create "universal" films, i.e. Western films, and eschewing what they perceived as "local" themes, locales and characters. Ella Shohat gives a thorough definition of those films and their filmmakers' ways of achieving what she calls the "effect of universality":

[o]ften the main characters remain unnamed [...] thus avoiding specific associations with Israeli milieus, locales, or ethnic origins. Elsewhere, the names are 'excentric' (sic) or defiantly non-Semitic [...] Linguistic

markers also play a part in this flight from the Middle East, from local habitations and local names [...] The characters often speak of life 'abroad', a term which in Israel almost invariably refers to the Western world, not simply as more accessible than the East for geopolitical reasons but also as a locus of desire for those with the means to travel. Location shooting, finally, tends to exclude the more typical Israeli imagery of streets and people, a device which contributes to the anonymity of locales. At times, the location shooting focuses on interiors [...] which subliminally metaphorizes the closed world in which protagonists dwell. (201)

Another key feature of Israeli "personal" cinema is the filmmakers' insistence on leaving their unique signature on the films, contributing to a growing awareness of auteur culture. In this respect, too, Guttman's films seem to fit within the category of "personal" cinema. Most of his characters have European, non-Israeli names, such as Thomas, Robby and Marianna. The presence of "abroad" as a fantasized space is prominent: in the feature version of *Drifting*, Robby's mother lives in Germany from where she sends him money; in *Bar 51* Marianna falls in love with a dancer and choreographer from America who promises to take her there; in *Amazing Grace* Thomas lives in New York City and goes back there after a short visit to Israel while Buffy (Iggy Wachsmann), Yonatan's flatmate, leaves for London at the end. Shots of interiors predominate, not only rooms and corridors but also dark and smoky bars, which could be part of the décor of any other big city. Guttman's emphasis on visual, cinematic values, such as meticulous design of the frame, over literary values, such as narrative and content, has been remarked upon by several critics. I shall discuss this aspect of his work at length in the section on melodrama below.

Shohat explains these artistic strategies, and those of other personal filmmakers, as exercising a provincial wish to escape the rough Middle-Eastern reality in which they were living, transforming Tel Aviv into Paris and Israeli people into French, while actually creating an "identityless world" and an ambience which is "quite out of synch with the social reality of Tel Aviv" (202). Shohat sees in their aspiration a reprehensible wish to dissociate oneself from a political situation that cannot be ignored. Comparing Israeli "new wave" films with similar international movements, she claims:

[u]nlike other alternative film movements [...] the Israeli filmmakers lacked a clear-cut political orientation: the principle of individualism reigned supreme. While these other movements tended to allude not only to a specifically cinematic intertext, but also to the contemporaneous cultural milieu in which characters were rooted, Israeli personal filmmakers went to great length to eliminate any references to the Israeli context, preferring always to develop an aesthetic of transcendence, abstraction, and ‘airy nothing’. (200-201)

Moreover, Shohat criticizes the hypocritical identification of the “personal” filmmakers in Israel with marginality, since “[v]irtually all of the protagonists of “personal cinema”, like those of the heroic-nationalist films, come from ‘First Israel’” (209).

Although Shohat includes Guttman in her account of the evolution of “personal cinema” in Israel, not all of the criteria she establishes can be easily applied to him or to his films. Guttman did indeed belong, to a certain extent, to what Shohat calls “First Israel”: he was an Ashkenazi (European-origin Jew), from the upper-middle class, an educated artist who had links with the cultural and bohemian centres in Tel Aviv. On the other hand, he was a gay man at a time when only a few other identities were considered more marginal or taboo. By choosing to make his gayness, hence his “authentic” marginality, the central theme of his films, Guttman gave up his position in “First Israel”. He replaced the common motifs of Israeli cinema, such as social invention, heroic militarism and the formation of Zionist subjectivity, with representations of a decadent and destructive way of life.

Shohat mistakenly includes Guttman’s first two feature films, *Drifting* and *Bar 51*, in a group of films made during the 1980s which, in her words, “focus on intimist *angst* and on basically introspective, isolated protagonists on the margins, treated through the grid of generally human issues, ‘*beyond time and place*’, such as love, aging, and the crisis of creativity” (212; second emphasis added). She ignores the direct references Guttman makes to Israeli culture, and his blunt confrontation with Israeli, Sabra values. Shohat herself admits, arguing in regards to *Drifting*, that “[a]lthough Robby finds Israeli political and cultural struggles irrelevant, he is nevertheless caught up in the country’s power structures” (215).

Guttman’s films are all about the protagonists’ desperate attempts to become part of the mainstream and their failure to do so; about discriminatory and

racist Israeli society; about the hypocritical nature of Zionist ideology. The foreign names are instrumental in emphasizing his characters' (and his own) unrealized wish to create a new life for themselves, perhaps in a new place. In *Bar 51* Zara's (Irit Sheleg) real name is Sarah Azulay, a Jewish-Eastern name, and she is originally from Bat-Yam, a poor suburb of Tel Aviv. The more she aspires to escape her past (and present) and to reinvent herself with a new, universal name, in a far, Western country (she dreams about starting anew in America with her treacherous foreign lover), the more she drowns in the low life of Tel Aviv. Other characters in the film follow the same path: Apolonia, who has a foreign and mysterious first name, is also Goldstein, a common Israeli-Jewish surname. As Igal Bursztyn observes, her name is as ironic as her appearance and gestures, which suggest both a stylized and glamorous artificiality and banality (*Face as Battlefield* 182). This contradiction can also be found in the character of Aranjuez (Alon Aboutboul), Zara's gay, "sissy" brother, whose real name is Israel. The new name and identity he adopts for himself do not bring him the redemption he is hoping for, and he remains caught on the margins of society, working as a dresser in the sleazy Bar 51. In *Amazing Grace* Thomas lives in New York, but cannot find happiness there. Struggling with his illness, he tells Yonatan, who hopes to study music in New York, how he left Israel for a similar dream but had to abandon it and work in a restaurant instead.

The universalism in Guttman's films, which might make some of them seem outdated or irrelevant in current Israeli reality, is not an "airy" escapism, and his cinema is anything but "beyond time and place", as Shohat suggests. Neither is it evidence of a lack of commitment to Israeli politics and struggles. On the contrary, it is a device used by Guttman to portray his characters and Israeli reality in a merciless and cruel manner. The attempt of Guttman's characters to escape a destined future is doomed to fail. This is how Guttman saw his own life story: the quest to be like everyone else and to cure his disease failed, both metaphorically and literally, leading to nothing but a life of alienation and a premature death.

Disintegration of the Nuclear Family

One of the main goals of the “personal films” made in Israel from the 1960s onwards was to negate the representation of a unified Israeli community often found in the heroic-nationalist films. As Shohat’s analysis of this broad and scattered movement shows, filmmakers adopted different approaches to express their critical views. Guttman’s films represented the “other” Israel by introducing gay men, who were, at the time, mostly invisible. Guttman’s approach to homosexuality and gay life was different from that of other filmmakers who preceded him. As a self-professed gay man, Guttman was able to offer a semi-autobiographical self-representation, rather than a partial, comic misrepresentation. Acknowledgement of the fact that Israeli society also includes gay men cruising in parks for casual sex was a step towards a much broader array of voices. As I will show later, Guttman was interested not only in the gay cause, but also in different kinds of exclusion, such as ethnic and racial.

While most “personal cinema” challenged the traditional perception of the Israeli collective, imagined as one big unified family, Guttman went further by showing the disintegration of the nuclear family. In *A Safe Place* the mother (Bella Ganor) is a dysfunctional, depressed single woman who can barely take care of her children. In the long version of *Drifting*, Robby’s (Yonatan Segal) family has lost any stability: his mother lives in Germany, and his father only visits him at his grandmother’s house from time to time. The grandmother is herself an eccentric woman who nevertheless cannot accept his lifestyle. Robby insists on living with her although his parents do not understand why he does so, and offer him financial help to enable him to leave. In *Bar 51*, Thomas and Marianna, the offspring of a Jewish father and a Christian mother, leave their small northern town for Tel Aviv after the death of their mother. Left on their own (their father died a long time ago), they begin an incestuous relationship which leads to destructive jealousy and eventually to Thomas’ death after his attempt to use force against his sister. In Guttman’s cinema, values of love, either familial or libidinal, are contaminated by either aberrant (in the case of Thomas and Marianna in *Bar 51*) or exploitative relationships, which all lead to an inevitable

tragic ending. The absence of the father and the subsequent shattering of the familial structure produce also a crisis of masculinity (Hammond 56).

This recurring theme in all of Guttman's films is best illustrated in *Amazing Grace*, where he weaves a complex network of familial relationships. The film follows two broken families, in both of which there is a gay son. As in his previous films (except for the long *Drifting*, in which the father makes a brief appearance only to urge his son to become heterosexual, as if it were his decision to make, and attributes his son's homosexuality to his not finding the right woman), fathers are absent, they are either dead or gone, and the mothers cannot help their children to cope with misery and sickness. The characters of *Amazing Grace* long for a family but they cannot have it. Helen is the mother of Yehudit (Rivka Michaeli), who makes her living as a seamstress. Helen believes her grandson Thomas is destined to die alone, "just like his father", not knowing that Thomas is HIV-positive. It is not just that he will not have a family and die alone; he might also die very young. Both older and younger generations are facing death. Thomas is the last descendant of a family that is about to disappear.

Even though Yehudit takes good care of the sick Helen, the relationship between the two could not be worse. In the opening scene of the film, mother and daughter have a fight. Later on, when Thomas asks Helen to be kinder to Yehudit, she tells him: "I have no time to be nice. I have a daughter who does not care if I'm dead or alive". Helen is convinced that Doris (Ada Valerie Tal), Yehudit's customer, is trying to convince her daughter to send her away from home. Doris herself is excited about meeting her ex-lover for the first time in twenty years. At the end of the film the spectators are informed that he did not recognize her. Once again, the attempt to become part of a family, to feel loved, fails. Like the other characters in the film, Doris is left disillusioned, saying: "I must admit, my love affairs are over".

Yonatan is in love with Thomas. His mother is also his employer, and fails to fulfill both roles. His sister, Tova'le (Karin Ophir), sleeps with Suliman, the Arab, for drugs. She becomes pregnant and has an abortion, not for the first time. Yonatan's former lover, Miki (Aki Avni), leaves him after they decide to move in together, saying he cannot be in a steady, long-term relationship. Miki himself comes from a broken home. As in the case of Thomas and Yonatan, the father is not present. Miki's mother (Tina Tulin), who cannot accept his homosexuality,

sends the military police to arrest him after he has gone AWOL. Miki then tries to kill himself but is rescued.

Secrets and lies play a central role in the film. Miki's mother refuses to acknowledge her son's way of life, and instead sends the police to deal with the "problem", and by doing so lies to herself and to her son. Yonatan's relationship with his mother is replaced with an employer-employee contractual agreement. Above all, there is Thomas's silence about his illness; he refuses to share his knowledge with his mother and grandmother and when Yonatan tries to get closer he claims that he has nothing to say about himself. The word AIDS is not uttered once throughout the film but there are numerous references to illness and death.

Through his emphasis on the disintegrating structure of nuclear families, from which the father is usually absent, Guttman makes a broader statement about Israeli society. The two are evidently interlinked: as Frantz Fanon claimed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "the family is a miniature of the nation" and "the characteristics of the family are projected onto the social environment" (142). By using the nuclear family as a microcosm of Israeli society, Guttman's films follow one of the key characteristics of 1950s American melodrama. In Guttman's films, as in the 1950s melodrama, the social and historical conditions in which the text is produced are displaced onto the familial and the personal (Hammond 59). Barbara Klinger argues that the genre seeks "to denaturalize and explode the myth of the happy, unproblematic founding unit of the family" (81). She writes: "[i]n the melodrama, the psychic destructiveness of social institutions [...] results in a rampant representation of ambition and of romantic love, disquieted through expressions of nymphomania, impotency, suicidal tendencies, obsessions with paternity, and the like" (81).

Dealing mainly with experiences and issues of concern to women, female-oriented melodramas have been referred to as "weepies" or "women's films" to distinguish them from "classic" or "masculine" genres such as the western or the gangster film (Byars 13).³⁹ Although Guttman did not direct "classic" or "traditional" melodramas, he employed certain aspects of the genre to deliver his agenda. This is most notable in *Amazing Grace*, where the emphasis on

³⁹ Maria Laplace defines the "woman's film" as a film "distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view and its narrative which most often revolves around the traditional realms of women's experience: the familial, the domestic, the romantic – those arenas where love, emotion and relationships take precedence over action and events" (139).

relationships between lonely mothers and their children can be seen as Guttman's tribute to classic melodramas such as Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). However, it is also apparent in Guttman's previous films, where the references to melodrama serve to unmask Israeli reality. In his negative sentiments towards militantly masculine Israeli society and in describing the life of gay men, who are traditionally perceived as weak and feminine⁴⁰ and discriminated against like women, Guttman's cinema owes much to the melodrama genre, and to Hollywood cinema in general.

Guttman, Melodrama and the Avant-garde Film

Hollywood was an important source of inspiration for Guttman, representing escapism and reinvention, whilst also offering structures and forms. For Guttman, as for Fassbinder, Hollywood stood for a better yet unattainable life. Movies, claims Michael Bronski, "are pure escapism", which explains their popularity among gay men. In the cinema, he writes, they "could feel part of a world from which they usually felt excluded. Movies provided an emotionally safe place where the imagination could flourish. In the movies, it was possible to go 'over the rainbow'" (93).

If the interest of Hollywood 1950s melodrama "lies primarily in the way that fissures and contradictions can be shown, by means of textual analysis, to be undermining the films' ideological coherence" (Mulvey 75), it is no wonder that Guttman, like Fassbinder, found it an appropriate genre to explore his position as a gay man in an oppressive hetero-centered society. Although Sirk's films were made in the highly puritan 1950s, two decades before Guttman's, there are some struggles that the characters of both directors share. Gay men in Israel in Guttman's lifetime, like Sirk's female characters to some extent, found it difficult to articulate and live their desires openly (hence the concentration on family, inner situation, the emphasis on interior location, melodramatic *mise-en-scène* and music, as I will discuss below). Nonetheless, Guttman's male characters articulate a far more developed political self-consciousness of gay identity than Sirk's

⁴⁰ Not only by the heterosexual majority but also by gay men themselves. In Richard Dyer's words: "[b]eing a gay man is not the same as being a straight woman, yet when we get together, we often talk as if it were" (*The Culture of Queers* 47).

female protagonists had of their identity as desiring women. Therefore, while Guttman's films should be studied in relation to Sirk's melodrama, one should be aware of the more permissive context in which they were made, namely an era which saw the formation of identity politics through the rise of minority discourses. Among other objectives, the use of melodrama in Guttman's films may be seen as a challenge to other movements in Israeli cinema, primarily the heroic-nationalist genre films of the 1950s. These often served as propaganda films, and as such, conjured up "a coherent picture of a world by concealing the incoherence caused by exploitation and oppression" (Mulvey 75).

According to Christine Gledhill, Douglas Sirk used the form of melodrama to resist unwelcome influences:

Sirk's formation as a left-wing intellectual and theatre director in 30s Weimar Germany and his experience making film melodramas at UFA when the Nazis came to power gave him a particular understanding of the contradictions hidden in the formal and ideological operations of melodrama. And in America, the grossness and vulgarity of the cliché-ridden plots handed him by the studios made the Hollywood genre particularly susceptible to formal criticism through parody and stylistic excess. (7)

Parody, stylistic excess and a camp quality⁴¹ are also an inseparable part of Guttman's cinematic language, which was developed in response to both the "realism" of heroic-nationalist cinema and the perceived vulgarity of the *Bourekas* films. The concept of cinematic excess assumes that the filmic text is the site of a complex semiotic heterogeneity that can never be totally reduced to the film's dominant narrative structures, and this heterogeneity is brought to the fore whenever the dominant representational conventions break down. The artificial

⁴¹ Susan Sontag suggested camp was "one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (*Against Interpretation* 277). Following Sontag's notes on camp, I would like to argue that as much as Guttman's films, *Bar 51* in particular, make use of camp sensibility in their "love of the exaggerated, the 'off'" (*Against Interpretation* 279) and in that they incarnate "a victory of 'style' over 'content'" (*Against Interpretation* 287) they are not wholly camp. Since "Camp is playful, anti-serious" (*Against Interpretation* 288), it cannot appertain to all of Guttman's work, which was very much engaged with life's tragic aspects. As for the use of the term camp in postmodern culture, it is important to note that Sontag's seminal essay was later criticized by queer theorists, like Moe Meyer, who argued that in Sontag's version, the term's homosexual connotations are "downplayed, sanitized, and made safe for public consumption" (7), and was part of "the heterosexual/Pop colonization of Camp in the 1960s" (10). For more on this debate, see Meyer (ed.), *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*.

mise-en-scène, the use of lighting as an expressive tool, usually to render the depressing, dark and haunted existence of the protagonists, and the theatrical dialogues, negate classic realist texts. The latter, it has been argued, reproduce bourgeois ideology by representing a coherent, hierarchically ordered representation of the world. The artificial, unrealistic cinematic style serves to address issues that realism comes to repress and deny.

In Israel, as in Europe, realism stood for national cinema, and it stood in contrast to the “studio-look and genre cinema” (Elsaesser, *Fassbinder’s Germany* 21). Guttman’s decision, not unlike Fassbinder’s before him, to import Hollywood melodrama, was an attempt to challenge what was considered to be the norm in Israeli cinema at the time. According to Thomas Elsaesser,

Fassbinder’s world has no extension in topographical space at all, has no ambitions to open itself to views or vistas, to the feel of the outdoors or convey the qualities of a landscape [...] Fassbinder is still a most unlikely candidate for pioneering a new national cinema: he was completely outside the traditions of cinematic realism. (*Fassbinder’s Germany* 21)

Referring to Fassbinder’s *Despair* (1977) and *Nora Helmer* (1973), Kaja Silverman points to the role of the “lavishly etched” windows in “working against the illusion of depth which represents such an important part of the cinematic *vraisemblance* – against that ‘impression of reality’ to which the classic film aspires” (133).

Guttman’s world, mainly in *Drifting*, *Bar 51*, and *Himmo*, *King of Jerusalem* but also, even if to a lesser extent, in *Amazing Grace*, is reduced to interiors of a flat, a club, a hospital or a cruising park, mostly shot at night. This is defiantly different to the long shots of vast landscapes in mainstream films, to which Guttman ironically refers by using the Israeli folk song, praising “beautiful and blooming land of Israel”. This song features twice in two of his films, as discussed below. Long shots of Israeli landscape also appear in a few “personal” films, which portray Tel Aviv as an exciting Western metropolis, similar to Paris or New York.

Lintels and doors often fill the frames of Guttman’s films. They represent a claustrophobic, demarcated space in which the protagonists are allowed to exist. Of *Himmo*’s style Yosefa Loshitzky observes:

[L]ike Fassbinder, Guttman frames his characters within the horizontal and vertical lines of the setting. This framing gives the spectator a claustrophobic sense of the entrapment experienced by the characters. Guttman's use of frames within a frame [...] becomes a visual expression of oppression and confinement. ("The Bride of the Dead" 224)

Guttman seems to depict an enclosed, self-contained universe, an arena devoid of any type of *jouissance*, while acknowledging the existence of a different reality, heteronormative "total reality"⁴² or, in Shohat's terminology, "First Israel". Avoiding shooting what seems to be "real Israel", Guttman's films create a feeling of "falseness" similar to that which Fred Camper finds in Sirk's cinema:

[t]o say that the look of a film feels false in terms of the film's own expression implies that the film itself suggests some other standard of reality. While Sirk can never show an experience more real than the primary feelings his films generate, he is able to use the films themselves to suggest that some reality higher than the films does in fact exist. (255)

According to Mike Hammond, "[o]ne of the properties of melodrama is that both the irresolvable conflict and that which is repressed return in the form of excess in mise-en-scene and the music" (60-61). Unlike 1950s melodramas, Guttman's films openly question the power of authority.⁴³ Nevertheless, the shooting of interiors, the use of dark colours and excessive, artificial *mise-en-scène*, further reinforce the feeling of detachment from the centres of power created by dialogues and individual characterization. In Guttman's case, the outside reality to which his films refer, the reality which stands in direct contrast to that of his protagonists, is the "total reality" of "First Israel".

The idea that Guttman's films take place in a world of their own and create a different reality is explicitly elaborated in his first short, *Repeat Premieres* (1976). The film follows the protagonist, a puppeteer, as he escapes his earthly

⁴² The term was coined by Judd Ne'eman. He writes: "[d]riven by messianic and utopian visions, the State of Israel as the republic of the Jews embodies for many Israeli Jews their historic total reality" (139).

⁴³ Similarly, Paul Julian Smith, writing about Pedro Almodóvar's cinema, has argued that "[i]n the US of the 1950s melodrama was symptomatic, testifying in spite of itself to the hidden contradictions of a repressive but apparently contented body politic. In the Spain of the 1990s (where nothing is taboo, where anything can be said) the family can no longer serve as the arena for the return of repressed psychic and social traumas: the personal simply remains personal, in an aggressive tautology" (*Desire Unlimited* 129-30).

existence to his fantasy world. The film opens with the puppeteer, left alone in a costume storeroom, starting to play with his puppets, creating an imaginary world in which it is he, for once, who sets the rules. This can be seen as a parallel to Robby's dream, in the long version of *Drifting*, of directing his own movie about his own life. As in *Repeat Premieres*, the issue of gaining power over one's situation is central.

The film emphasizes the protagonist's solitude and his illusory world, populated as it is by images of mythical movie stars and motivated by his fantasies. In a later scene he sits in front of a large theatre mirror, putting on make up, pretending to be someone else, a Hollywood movie star perhaps. The film ends with the protagonist gazing from his balcony at a group of girls skating around a square, an allusion to the famous photograph of Theodor Herzl, taken on the balcony in Basel during the first Zionist Congress (1897), where the idea of the Jewish State was originally conceived. The choice of soundtrack for this sequence, a piece by Wagner, whose anti-Jewish sentiments have made him and his art controversial in Israel, emphasizes Guttman's dissociation from Zionist-Israeli cultural codes. The unfamiliar, beautified architecture and the surreal vision of girls skating around a square imply this is a dream sequence. Like the whole film, this sequence emphasizes the protagonist's isolation from the "real" world. His escape from the oppressive heteronormative Zionist world may have a link to his homosexuality.

When considering *Repeat Premieres*, an unusual film in Guttman's overall work, Kenneth Anger's cinema, especially *Fireworks* (1947), come to mind. Like *Fireworks*, *Repeat Premieres* takes place in a fantasized world with surreal elements and is a statement on gay men's state of mind. In *Bike Boys*, *Drag Queens*, and *Superstars*, an analysis of gay identities in American underground films of the 1960s, Juan A. Suárez writes about *Fireworks*'s

withdrawal into psychology and interiority [...] evidenced in the framing of the film as a dream, with the protagonist's consciousness becoming the privileged point of view through which the narrative is relayed. The focus on the dialectics of consciousness and perception resulted in a style that tried to convey the vagueness of dreams and subjective states by supplanting the rigid rules of the classical continuity system with loose constructions of action and setting. (129)

The protagonist's feeling of isolation, his consciousness becoming a "privileged point of view", is enhanced in *Repeat Premieres* by two motifs, which Guttman adopts from Fassbinder: mirrors and dummies. Both elements symbolize the protagonist's escape from the "real" world into his own narcissistic, homosexual self. Christian Braad Thomsen argues that

[t]he mirror, in particular, was to become Fassbinder's favourite visual symbol [...] Fassbinder repeatedly made a point of doubling a scene with the help of a mirror. It might be thought the mirror – above all, a symbol of narcissism – is an organic element in the universe of a homosexual film-maker [...] But for Fassbinder, homosexuality was probably like neurosis for Freud and crime for Hitchcock, a magnifying glass through which he could see all the more clearly how 'normal people' function [...] Related to the mirror motif is the use of dummies and other figures. Fassbinder often comments on the situation of a film character by doubling the character with a plaster figure or a statue. Sometimes the dummies also function as projection surfaces for parts of the psyche, of dreams and longings, or they show how we treat one another: not as human beings with a soul and reason, but as commodities. (*Fassbinder* 27-28)

The mirrors in Guttman's film, used as a strong reference to the role of mirrors in both Fassbinder's and Sirk's films, indicate a self-contained world in which his protagonists dwell. At the same time, mirrors can only offer a reflection, an imitation of oneself, either "an opposite" of oneself or an absence. Kaja Silverman has argued that, for Fassbinder, the mirror was another tool to emphasize the artificiality of identities, in particular masculine identity. She writes:

Fassbinder further denaturalizes identity by emphasizing at every conceivable juncture its imaginary bases. Thus he never misses an opportunity to point the camera at a character's mirror reflection rather than at the character himself or herself, and he shoots almost compulsively through windows, as if to deny any possibility of a direct or immediate access to the object of the camera's scrutiny. (133)

Aaron Betsky has pointed out that although the mirror's space is "free and open", it is constrained by its lack of reality, "an alternate world that is unreal [...] The mirror is good for nothing else than appearing: as soon as you look away from it, it ceases to function. You can't live in the mirror" (*Queer Space* 17). Similarly, Sirk said of mirrors: "the mirror is the imitation of life. What is interesting about a

mirror is that it does not show you yourself as you are, it shows you your own opposite" (Halliday 47).

The mirror motif also suggests that Guttman's films and the characters in them refer only to themselves and to the thread of gloom that connects them. This is further elaborated by giving two of the films the same title, and by using recurring names, such as Thomas, for his characters. Thus, Guttman's films weave a world of their own, which is another element borrowed from classic melodramas. Thomas Elsaesser writes about the protagonists of melodrama: "[t]he dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves. The characters are [...] each others' sole referent, there is no world outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously" ("Tales of Sound and Fury" 56).

This world that Guttman's characters inhabit is what is left for them, having been excluded from the "first", "blooming" world of Zionist Israel. Instead of vast lands they have seedy bars; instead of creating families they cruise in parks. At the same time there is also a struggle to be part of the other world, but this is not possible. Being rejected by society as well as rejecting its false values and beliefs themselves, they remain excluded. Happiness in Guttman's films, as in Sirk's or Fassbinder's, remains elusive, unattainable. Guttman's characters are forever haunted. It is impossible to reach happiness – longing is all that is left.

Desire is seldom consummated in Guttman's films. In *Amazing Grace* Yonatan experiences a brief moment of happiness when he is with Thomas, but as he tells Thomas later, he struggles not to get used to what he knows he will not have for long. In *A Safe Place* the protagonist, Danny (Doron Nesher), finds refuge in the cinema, where life is a reflection, merely an "imitation of life", or experiences desire through mediating objects such as his classmates' shirts, left in a cloakroom during sports class. The realm of fantasy serves as the "safe place" mentioned in the title. In one of the scenes a young man takes the seat next to Danny in a film theatre, making an unequivocal sexual gesture, but the latter sneaks outside. Earlier in the film, Danny fantasizes about a man, imagining him lying still on a sofa, but when he approaches to kiss him, the imaginary man wakes up and vanishes from the screen, leaving him alone even in his own private world. In *Repeat Premieres* the protagonist builds a world of his own, reducing

his contact with the outer world to a minimum in order to avoid hurt and disappointment. In all of Guttman's short films, the protagonists' separation from the "real" world, their life in the shadows, is further emphasized by the fact that the films are shot in black and white. But the spectator knows the protagonist will not be able to run away forever; at some point he will have to confront reality, and in this confrontation he will surely pay the price for who he is. This is very similar to what Camper says of Sirk's films:

[t]hey set up the idea of happiness, and often appear to be showing it for a fleeting instant as a real possibility, but the passage of that instant reveals that the feeling can be perceived only in the form of the entire film, and that in this context it is clearly foredoomed. It is quite characteristic of Sirk that the narrative forms of his films suggest that any happiness which appears to occur cannot last. (252)

Guttman and Israel's "Total Reality"

Himmo, King of Jerusalem tells the story of Hamutal, a young nurse from Tel Aviv, who arrives at the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, now converted into a provisional military hospital. The year is 1948 and Jerusalem is under siege. Hamutal, whose boyfriend has been killed in the fighting, is assigned to work with the most seriously injured patients. She gets to know Himmo, who is waiting to die, and she falls in love with him. Himmo was once "the king of Jerusalem", a handsome and brave soldier who lost his arms and his eyesight in the battle for independence. Shortly before the siege is lifted, Hamutal kills Himmo with a fatal injection. She then returns to Tel Aviv.

Even in *Himmo, King of Jerusalem*, perhaps his least autobiographical film (it was based on Yoram Kaniuk's novel, published in 1966), Guttman's presence cannot be overlooked. Lying immobilized on his bed wishing for his death, which is the ultimate redemption, Himmo, like the some of Guttman's other characters, is *nagua*. Like them, and not unlike Guttman himself, Himmo is "the 'Other' of the Zionist (European/Ashkenazi) dream of normalcy" (Loshitzky, "The Bride of the Dead" 222). As Loshitzky points out, the Jerusalem-born Himmo stands out against the "mythological Sabraism, associated in Israeli-

dominant ideology with being Ashkenazi and Tel Aviv or kibbutz-born" ("The Bride of the Dead" 222)

Once heroic soldiers, *Himmo*'s protagonists find themselves useless and forgotten by the establishment. When the soldiers hear that David Ben Gurion has declared the establishment of the State of Israel in Tel Aviv, one of them says to another: "the State of Israel is in Tel Aviv, here there is a siege". Like Guttman's gay characters, the wounded soldiers of *Himmo* cannot be part of the society to which they belong. Loshitzky states:

[c]onfronting our expectations that the heroes of the '48 War exemplify 'healthy', normal heterosexuality are implicit expressions of homosexuality [...] Gutman's latent comparison between Tel Aviv's post-modern outcasts of the 80s and the soldiers who were wounded in the battle of Jerusalem during the '48 War [...] implicitly poses a critical and disturbing equation which challenges the official Zionist ideology of Israel. ("The Bride of the Dead" 224-25)

Although *Himmo* is a period film, it shares the same grand themes that recur in Guttman's other, more ostensibly gay, films. With its gay subtext ("[t]he film [...] brings to the foreground the sadomasochistic dimension inherent in the relationship between Franji and Asa – only hinted at in the novel – and adds to it homosexual ambivalence" [Loshitzky, "The Bride of the Dead" 224]) and the central role given to women, the film contributed to "[t]he gendering of the history of collective memory" (Melman 57). Melman argues that in Israel collective memory, delineated by historians, is deficient because "the concern with the relationship between the memory and myths of 'Eretz Yisraeli-ness' and Israeliness, and the formation of national identities is separated from the historical study of male and female gendered identities" (56). Following Melman I would like to argue that the inclusion of women and gay men in a nationalist-heroic tale such as *Himmo* encourages a less homogenous and monolithic map of Israeli national memory. Rather than homogenizing the collective who remembers, Kaniuk, and to a greater extent, Guttman, attempted to open up the national memory/story to alternative stories/memories.

Himmo's defiance of the hegemonic and patriarchal Zionist master-narrative links it to Guttman's previous films. It was only in *Himmo* that Guttman truly reevaluated the notion of patriotic death, which had been glorified in various

heroic-nationalist films, offering instead a dystopian version of one of Zionism's greatest narratives, with the addition of a homoerotic tension between its male protagonists. However, *Drifting* and *Bar 51* also question the "idea of self-sacrifice for the homeland" (Ne'eman 136) just by showing those who refuse to adjust to such norms, or simply cannot. All of Guttman's films represent a disjunction between the protagonists and their "total reality", the State of Israel.

Laura Mulvey states of 1950s melodrama, whose stylistic and thematic conventions apply to most of Guttman's work and especially to *Bar 51* (see above), that "[n]o ideology can even pretend to totality: it must provide an outlet for its own inconsistencies. This is the function of 50s melodrama. It works by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; its excitement comes from conflict not between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love" (75). Such inconsistencies are manifested in several key scenes in Guttman's films. One of them is a scene in *Drifting* in which Robby and his married gay friend Ilan (Ami Traub) walk along the paths of Independence Park in Tel Aviv, named after the 1948 war, but better known as a central meeting and cruising place for gay men. There, they encounter three teenage runaways, two gay boys and the sister of one of them, singing a famous Israeli folk song. The three youngsters find a refuge at Robby's place, after he performs a sexual act with one of them in the park.

Back at his home, Robby "auditions" the two boys for the film he hopes to make. He watches them as they undress (at one point he also asks them to perform a sexual act with each other), an action that marks them as "feminine". At the same time, Robby, who is now in the more powerful position (a privilege which he abuses), is gay, and therefore, under the gaze of mainstream society, is no less feminine than the two teenagers he gazes at. Guttman manages to show the cruelty of hierarchy borrowed from the heterosexual world and enacted in the gay world. The gay community may try to achieve a communal brotherhood, but it will prove to be difficult.

In this scene Guttman attempts to delineate the mechanism of the penetrative gaze, to make it visible. It is no longer an "abstract description" but "an actual event" (Lubin, "The Woman as Other" 306), a transition from metaphor to literalness, which, in the words of Orly Lubin, "uncovers and subverts the power mechanism of the gaze" (Lubin, "The Woman as Other" 306).



Fig. 3.3 The audition scene in the long *Drifting*. From www.movies-too-gay.com/tv/pix/d/drifting.jpg.



Fig. 3.4 Thomas (Juliano Merr) and Marianna (Smadar Kalchinsky) in *Bar 51*. Reproduced from Schnitzer.

ed) in the long version of *Drifting*.

here on the right, the scene is a close-up of the two characters.



Fig. 3.5 The wounded soldiers of *Himmo, King of Jerusalem*. Reproduced from Schnitzer.



Fig. 3.6 *Amazing Grace*. Guttman depicted homosexuality as painful and marginal. Reproduced from Schnitzer.

Guttman uses the mechanism of the penetrative gaze here, as sex has been seen traditionally as the only arena in which gay men are allowed to act or to be acknowledged by the heterosexist establishment. This scene is a critique of both the wish to form a supportive gay community and of the mainstream view of gay men as primarily sexual beings.

The same folk song which is featured in *Drifting*, describing the “Jerusalem boy and girl” who live in “beautiful and blooming Israel”, is repeated in a scene in *Bar 51* in which Apolonia Goldstein, an ageing cabaret singer in the shady Bar 51, who has taken the two orphans into her home (Thomas is expected to have sex with her in exchange for this gesture),⁴⁴ attempts to commit suicide in the bathroom. Her failed attempt is taking place while Thomas and Marianna are watching Sarah’le Sharon, the Israeli folk singer known for her communal singing events, on television, urging an audience full of soldiers to sing along, and saying:

There are these days when you think all sorts of thoughts and you feel like crying, but instead of crying you sing and when you sing together, you feel great. I want all of us to experience this great feeling this evening. This is an opportunity to sing only with soldiers, who might be tired but are still eager to sing.

This scene points to the unbridgeable chasm between the “wholesome” existence of Sarah’le Sharon and the soldiers she addresses, who represent Israel’s “total reality”, and that of the two misfit orphans in Apolonia’s flat, now flooded by a stream of blood and soapy water.

The dance sequences in Guttman’s films have a similar role in contrasting a “wholesome” reality with low life existence. As mentioned in *Amos Guttman, Film Director*, Guttman was fond of the Hollywood musical, and his greatest dream was to direct such a film. He placed short dance sequences in almost all of

⁴⁴ The relationship between Apolonia and Thomas echoes that between the ageing cleaner and the young Moroccan immigrant in Fassbinder’s *Fear Eats the Soul* (1973), a film loosely based on Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). All three films portray the doomed relationship between two parties who are excluded, for different reasons, from mainstream society. In Sirk’s it is a bonding between a rich widow and a gardener in class-obsessed 1950s American suburban culture while Fassbinder’s film deals with the formation of an impossible relationship between a young Arab and an older lower-class woman against the backdrop of racist German society. Guttman’s theme is closer to that of Fassbinder. Like the latter he emphasizes not only the age and class differences between the two but also their different ethnic origins. Unlike Fassbinder, however, he makes the exploitative element in the relationship between Thomas and Apolonia clear from the outset.

his films, and these can be read as an ironic take on Hollywood musicals or Israeli folk dances, identified with the first Zionist pioneers. As one might expect, these dance sequences Guttman directed lack the naivety or the joy attributed to them in musicals or in Israeli heroic-nationalist cinema. Instead, they are transformed into unequivocal sexual acts, in which the men are eroticized, and hence feminized as they become objects of desire, and take place in sleazy nightclubs. Raz Yosef argues that the dance rituals in Guttman's films are meant to dramatize the power relations of sex, its games of domination and submission (*Beyond Flesh* 145).

It is not only the disjunction from Israeli "total reality" that Guttman's films represent, but also his rejection of the politics and dynamics of the local gay and lesbian community, which has submitted itself to the master Zionist-Israeli narrative in order to be accepted as an equal part in Israeli life. Guttman's criticism isolated him from the *Agudah*. His loathing of the false, politically correct image the gay community was trying to create for itself is articulated in Robby's opening monologue in the feature version of *Drifting*:

If the film dealt with a social problem, or if the hero at least had a political opinion: if he were a soldier, if he were a resident in a developing town, if he served on a naval destroyer, if he became religious, if he were a war widow. But if he must be a homosexual, then at least he should suffer; he shouldn't enjoy it. The state is burning; there's no time for self-searching. There's a war now. There's always a war. He left the army of his own will, without any reason. The viewers won't accept it. There are too many dead relatives. He's not sympathetic, not thoughtful; he scorns all those who want the best for him. He's not even a sensitive soul, a composed intellectual. Why should they identify with me? Why should they [the viewers] identify with him? (translated by Yosef, *Beyond Flesh* 152)

Guttman's message is clear: if one is gay, one should at least suffer, pay for what one is, be "appropriately gay" – *nagua*. Robby is paying not only for being gay but also for leaving the army, an act that in the early 1980s was perceived as a terrible crime.⁴⁵ Of the film *The Night Soldier* (*Chayal HaLayla*, Dan Wollman,

⁴⁵ Things have long changed, as exemption from compulsory military service – through a psychiatric diagnosis, for example – became an easier procedure as well as more common and accepted. In certain circles, it is even considered to have a certain "rebellious" allure. Furthermore, the escalation in the tension between Israelis and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories and the growing criticism of Israeli actions have caused a wave of "refuseniks", i.e. soldiers in conscript service or reserve soldiers who refuse, for reasons of conscience, to serve in the occupied territories or at all, and for which they are usually sent to prison.

1984), in which the protagonist was exempted from military service against his will because of “personality inadequacy” and, as an act of revenge, murders other soldiers, Judd Ne’eman points out: “[a]ccording to Israeli mores, rejection from military service impairs the individual’s integrity and creates a mark of shame which in turn triggers retaliatory acts of rejection” (140). In *Drifting* Robby is not being rejected (although one can assume he would be if his sexual identity were known, according to the army directive in those years),⁴⁶ but he is the one who rejects both the army, hence the State of Israel, and the narrative that the gay community tries to force upon him.

Like the protagonist of *The Night Soldier*, Robby passes from “a state of solidarity to the diametrically opposed state of anomie” (Ne’eman 141). And like *The Night Soldier*, *Drifting* also contains an act of revenge/betrayal, when he asks one of the three Arabs – or “terrorists”, as his grandmother calls them – whom he has brought to his home, to fuck him. Through this act Robby renounces his supposedly superior position as a “white” Jew and gives himself to the pleasure of being dominated. By doing so he undermines not only the national discourse but also the attempts of the gay community to become part of this discourse.

By scripting a sex scene in which a “white” Jew submits to a nameless Arab, Guttman suggests a pact between representatives of two of the then most oppressed groups in Israeli society. In an interview with *Davar* he said: “the Arab protagonists were necessary to the film. They are not gay, but they are a part of the fraternity of the useless” (Wallach 16). Robby’s life might be better, materially, at least, than that of the Arab man who fucks him, but he is just as socially excluded. In their exclusion from the public sphere, gay men in the Israel of the early 1980s were as much a threat as the three Arabs to whom Robby offers refuge in his home. The scene in question links one oppressed group to another,

⁴⁶ Fink & Press argue that “[a]ccording to a 1983 directive, every Israeli soldier known or suspected to be gay had to undergo examination by a mental health officer and the security clearance department” (10). In the teen comedy *Private Popsicle* (*Sapiches*, Boaz Davidson, 1984), the fourth in the popular *Lemon Popsicle* series, two of the protagonists pretend they are a gay couple in order to get a sickness leave in the boot camp where they serve. It was only in June 1993 that a new policy was adopted, and many of the restrictions on recruitment of gay men and lesbians to the army and their disposition within the forces were lifted (Kama, “From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*” 147). Since 1998 there have been no official restrictions at all on gay men and lesbians in the army. See Fink & Press, and Walzer.

indicating a certain parallelism between the two.⁴⁷ It is one of many that made Guttman's films so hard to watch and accept, both in the gay world and beyond. I shall discuss the negative reception of the films, especially in the gay community, and the reasons behind it, in the next section of the chapter.

Guttman and the Politics of the Israeli Gay Community

Amos Guttman's struggle to finance his films was obviously a result of the subject matter he chose to deal with (as described in *Drifting's* opening monologue) but it was also a part of a much broader problem Israeli filmmakers were facing in the 1980s and 1990s, namely a severe lack of funds. As Ella Shohat pointed out, the lack of financial aid from the government was a result of its discrimination against the cinema and its favouritism towards other arts (184). Shohat wrote her account of the Israeli film industry in 1989. Her claim about the poor financial support given by the Israeli government was made in the same period that Guttman directed most of his films.

As mentioned above, Guttman's case was even more complex. On one level, he was battling to get support from the state. With his first two feature films, his efforts failed. Three years of negotiation with the Committee to Encourage Film Production (which works through the Ministry of Commerce and Industry) ended with its members deciding not to assist Guttman with the production of the long version of *Drifting*. During this period Guttman and Edna Mazia, the screenwriter, changed the script several times. The rejection by the fund became an important element in the final version. In an interview with *The Canadian Jewish News* before the screening of the film at the Montreal World Film Festival in 1983, Guttman said: "[w]e thought all you need is a good script to get some financial support, which is very limited, from government sources, but getting official approval was most difficult in our experience, so we raised money by ourselves and got the film made" (Lazarus 25).⁴⁸ Moreover, the Israeli consular office in Montreal applied diplomatic pressure to withdraw the film from the

⁴⁷ Similarly, love affairs between Israeli Jewish women and Palestinian men in "forbidden love" Israeli films symbolize, according to Yosefa Loshitzky, "a consolidation of a coalition of minorities against the dominance of the Israeli man" (*Identity Politics* 161).

⁴⁸ Guttman's *Himmo*, *King of Jerusalem* and *Amazing Grace* did get government grants.

festival. As reported by *The Canadian Jewish Press*, the official reason given by the consulate was that “*Drifting* did not meet the standards of taste and quality which should be expected of Israeli films as reflective of the modern Jewish state” (Lazarus 25).⁴⁹

The trouble caused by the establishment did not come as a total surprise, given the topic of the film and the bold sexual scenes, including the interracial sex scene. However, Guttman had to face objections from a less expected quarter: that of the gay and lesbian community, his “home” base.⁵⁰ The community members, represented by *Agudah*, had their own fight to win at the time, a fight to gain legitimate status by producing positive, “clean” representations of gay life in the media.

Guttman did not find much interest in the community’s agenda. In numerous interviews conducted with him in the national and international press, he emphasized that his intention was not to be a spokesperson for the Israeli gay community, acknowledging that most audiences would like the protagonist to be more representative. Like Fassbinder and his self-proclaimed “aesthetics of pessimism” (Thomsen, “Five Interviews with Fassbinder” 86), namely his refusal to create “‘positive images’ of women, blacks, gays, and other disenfranchised groups, images which all too often work to resubstantialize identity, and even at times to essentialize it” (Silverman 154), Guttman opted for portraying a harsh, self-annihilating existence and heroes whose flaws are well exposed. In his review of *Drifting*, Thomas Waugh notes:

⁴⁹ It is also important to note that *Drifting* won two important Israeli awards in 1983, given by the Israeli Film Centre, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and the Ministry of Education and Culture: the film was awarded a special prize for outstanding achievement in a first feature and its star, Yonatan Segal, was named best actor (Abileah). The film also garnered favourable reviews outside Israel. *The Village Voice*, for instance, wrote that “Guttman has heroically said to hell with both conformity and traditional masculinity, and made an unprogrammatic film in a country where much of the cinema is propaganda meant to herd the citizenry, to uplift and unify” (Pally).

⁵⁰ In this respect, Guttman’s difficulties in granting funding and pleasing different sub-groups within the gay community, were similar to experiences of other non-Israeli filmmakers who struggled to finance their gay films at the time. The British Film Institute Production Board, for instance, refused to assist director Ron Peck with the production of his debut feature *Nighthawks* (1978), which was eventually produced on a meagre budget, collected from private investors. The film has been billed since its release the first British gay film. It is likely that the film had some influence over Guttman. Both filmmakers expressed, through aesthetics and narrative, feelings of isolation and loneliness as inherent parts of the gay experience. Like Guttman’s films, *Nighthawks* was criticized at the time of its release by gay groups, which protested against what they perceived as a negative portrayal of gay life (as reported by Peck to Matt Lucas on the DVD edition of *Nighthawks* [2005]).

He's (Robby) no angel of course: he can be a little arrogant [...] and tends to be a bit cruel to people who come on to him [...] But he's enormously likeable, and this presumably auto-biographical portrait works because it's so unpretentious and sincere, managing to combine self-criticism with a healthy self-esteem ("Dreams, Cruises and Cuddles in Tel Aviv").

The film was not well received: Amit Kama, a prominent gay male activist and the first chairman of *Agudah*, accused Guttman and gay author Yotam Reuveni, who, like Guttman, was one of the very few Israeli artists to come out during the 1970s, of practicing self-oppression, which is, according to Kama, the ultimate success of oppression. Kama claimed that "[i]n spite of being the first 'heroes' to publicly come out, and produce gay-themed narratives, they were trapped in self-hatred, and thereby unable to free their works from internalized homophobia" ("From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*" 141-42).

In his book *The Newspaper and the Closet: Israeli Gay Men's Communication Patterns*, Kama explains how famous gay men often serve, or are expected to serve, because there are only a few of them, as "ambassadors" of the gay community in non-gay society. They are perceived by other gay men as friends, advisers, and role models; they are a source of identification for all gay men and even more so for those who are still in the closet (27). In this sense, Guttman did betray his audience: his public stance regarding his sexuality was indeed unusual at the time, but it was not used, as one might have hoped, as leverage for creating and distributing "clean" images of gay life. His films did contain what Kama calls "suggested homophobia" (*The Newspaper and the Closet* 37). On the one hand they represented openly gay men on the screen for the very first time; on the other, the portrayal of these characters enhanced their marginal status and did not assist in eradicating common beliefs about them (Kama, *The Newspaper and the Closet* 41). Indeed, Robby in *Drifting* is, as Waugh points out, sometimes arrogant and he finds himself repeatedly in dysfunctional relationships, while his friend Ilan is an exploiter, who has married for financial reasons. Most importantly, their alleged corruption seems almost inevitable, a homosexual trait, as the character of Ezri (Ben Levin), the naïve young boy Robby picks up in the park at the beginning of the film, demonstrates: in the course of the film he loses his naivety, and becomes, ostensibly, like the other members of the community, a regular cruiser in the park. He also often has sex with older men for money.

However, these matters should not be oversimplified: what Kama fails to acknowledge is the inevitable effect of living under oppression and the origins of feelings of self-hatred and the desire to become someone else. Furthermore, Kama's essay was written in 2000, many years after Guttman directed his first film, and after the gay community in Israel had undergone dramatic changes and become a legitimate, even sought-after, player in the Israeli public arena. As much as the reaction of the members of the gay community to these films is understandable, one cannot deny that Guttman's films describe candidly the difficult process of self-acceptance gay men often go through.

From the perspective of a much more open society, Guttman's films seem sometimes not only to be the cause of a great deal of damage to the gay community but also inaccurate and irrelevant. However, the situation in the early-to-mid-1980s was different: actor and artist Boaz Turjeman, who acted in both the short and the long versions of *Drifting*, talks in *Amos Guttman, Film Director* about the sufferings he had to endure, caused not only by heterosexual society but also by the nascent gay community in Tel Aviv. At the time the documentary on Guttman was made, Turjeman had been based in Brussels for many years, a decision that might be read as a reaction to his experience in Israel.

As Edna Mazia, who co-wrote the scripts for *Drifting* and *Himmo*, claims in *Amos Guttman, Film Director*, the bourgeoisie obviously did not take much interest in their films, but apparently even people on the margins of society, whom the films depict, did not like to see the "truth" about their own lives unfold on the screen.⁵¹ In the same documentary, Amir Kaminer, a film journalist, critic, and a key figure in Tel Aviv nightlife and its gay scene, commented:

Guttman showed the imperfections of the gay community – betrayal, casual sex, drugs. This is a part of gay life, besides the beauty one can also find in it. People didn't appreciate this candid approach, also out of hypocrisy. Nobody likes to acknowledge the lesser parts of himself.

⁵¹ Interestingly, despite a growing interest in Guttman's work after his death, and although many Israeli films of the 1970s and 1980s have been released on DVD, Guttman's films have not yet. There is a plan to release them on DVD format later in 2006.

As an autobiographical statement, *Drifting* attests to Guttman's difficulty in accepting the role assigned by society to gay men. The criticism made against the heterosexual majority is not a demonstration of confidence; rather, it attempts to conceal the wish to be part of the majority, to erase the markings of otherness. It is indeed a wish for self-annihilation and reinvention of oneself as "normal". Guttman's films, in short, represent both a courageous pride and a self-hatred. They are both a celebration of difference, which is manifested in the films' themes and form, and an expression of the wish to be like the heterosexual majority. I shall explore this contradictory approach in the next section.

Guttman's Conflicting Selves

Like the character of Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), who pretends to be white, and like gay actor Rock Hudson, who produces a conventional, clean-cut image of masculinity in all his films, especially in those directed by Sirk, Guttman's protagonists also aspire to assimilation. Since their gayness is not visible⁵² (as in the case of Sarah Jane, who, born to a white father and a black mother, can easily pass for white)⁵³ some of them try to pass for straight. The straight-looking man (Ze'ev Shimshoni) in the short version of *Drifting*, for example, hides his gayness from his girlfriend while looking for casual sex with men. Similarly, Robby in the long version of *Drifting* tries to "fix" his deviation by having sex with a former girlfriend.

As Fassbinder pointed out in his notes on *Imitation of Life*, "Sarah Jane wants to be white, not because white is a prettier color than black but because you

⁵² Richard Dyer maintains that "[t]here is nothing about gay people's physiognomy that declares them gay, no equivalents to the biological markers of sex and race. There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments ... that bespeaks gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay" (*The Matter of Images* 19). This is best shown in *Far From Heaven* (2002), Todd Haynes' tribute to Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), in which the secretly gay man is far more accepted by society even after his homosexuality is revealed (he is also the only character who experiences a "happy ending" of a sort, being able to establish a relationship with his young male lover), whereas the other two protagonists – the gay man's wife and her black gardener/friend – remain alone and in despair. The man's unremarkable homosexuality is much less of a threat than the gardener's blackness or the wife's desire for him.

⁵³ On the politics of passing in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, see Mary Ann Doane, Chapter 11 in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*.

can live better as a white person” (*The Anarchy of the Imagination* 87). Hudson’s sexuality was kept secret in order to secure his status in Hollywood as one of its most popular heartthrobs,⁵⁴ but at the same time, at least in retrospect, his appearance did manage to undermine the conventional, mainstream perceptions of masculinity and heterosexuality. For instance, by becoming an object of the erotic gaze – a position assumed to be reserved for female protagonists who are scrutinized by a voyeuristic male spectator – Hudson’s husky and manly screen persona was “feminized” (Neale 18). Similarly, Richard Dyer sees Hudson’s appearances as a broader attempt to “give away” Hudson’s true sexuality, and by doing so, to subvert the alleged coherence of the films and the reality they come to reflect: “[w]hat’s fascinating is the way this quality unsettles the apparently complacent heterosexuality of his films [...] Rock, in effect if not in intention, seems to subvert the security with which ideas of masculinity and femininity, normality and heterosexuality, are held” (*The Culture of Queers* 163).

Hudson was homosexual, but this fact was erased from the films he starred in, achieving a perfect effect (his homosexuality became public only years later along with the news that he had AIDS, a revelation that shocked many at the time).⁵⁵ In both cases – that of the character of Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* and that of Rock Hudson’s persona – concealing one’s true self suggests a better, more secure life. This is also how Guttman’s characters view their lives: they could be better if only they were like everyone else. But unlike Sarah Jane and Rock Hudson, Guttman’s characters also have a strong desire to rebel against society’s rules. Like Annie (Juanita Moore), Sarah Jane’s mother, who believes her daughter’s wish to pass for white is a “sin”, as claimed by Fassbinder (*The Anarchy of the Imagination* 88), Guttman’s gay protagonists know they cannot truly be something they are not.

Whereas society’s rules were not openly contested in the America of the 1950s,⁵⁶ Guttman’s characters, who live in a post-Stonewall era, act up against

⁵⁴ In the introduction to his collection of interviews with Sirk, conducted in the early 1970s, Jon Halliday writes: “Sirk asked me to hold off writing about the fact that Rock Hudson, who was then still alive, was homosexual, until all concerned were dead” (4).

⁵⁵ Sirk said about Hudson: “Rock, although homosexual, exerted a powerful influence on women. I don’t only mean on the screen, where you can create an illusion [...] But in real life, too” (Halliday 107).

⁵⁶ Fassbinder comments on Sirk’s characters: “[n]ot one of the protagonists realizes that all these things – thoughts, wishes, dreams – grow directly out of their social reality or are manipulated by it” (*The Anarchy of the Imagination* 87).

their oppression: they look different (they put on make up and wear “bizarre” clothes), perform gay sex, communicate with the Arab “enemy” (and even surrender and let themselves be dominated by Arabs), and look for sexual partners in the park named after the War of Independence. The characters’ acceptance and non-acceptance of their status, lives and locales give them and the films they populate their sense of ambiguity, confusion and depth.

The contradictory approach towards marginality, and homosexuality in particular, in Guttman’s films, can be seen as a manifestation of a fluid state of inner conflicts or contradictions within the subject, a dispersal of selves or identities. As such, it is an enhanced reaction derived from one’s marginality, but it can also be seen as a more specific example of society’s view of queerness. Kathleen McHugh has suggested that

[t]he experience of queers, many of whom ‘pass’ precisely because of the phenomenon of heterosexual presumption, gives them a more immediate access to the mystifying figuration of the ‘unified’ subject. This edge or ‘in’ sight would not be limited to queers, of course. Anyone who experiences ‘passing’ – identity disjunctions wherein the nefarious connections between social distinctions, identity, and appearance are revealed, by definition, to the ‘passing’ subject – would have access to such an edge. (240n5)

Analyzing the media coverage of Rock Hudson’s illness, Richard Dyer traces a particular juxtaposition found in popular views of gay life:

[s]uch a juxtaposition of beauty and decay is part of a long standing rhetoric of queerness. It is the Dorian Gray syndrome. It is a way of constructing queer identity as a devotion to an exquisite surface (queers are so good-looking, so fastidious, so stylish, so amusing) masking a depraved reality (unnatural, promiscuous and repulsive sex acts). The rhetoric allows the effects of an illness gotten through sex to be read as a metaphor for that sex itself. (*The Culture of Queers* 172-73)

As stated above, Guttman’s films express a strong autobiographical sensibility. Contradiction, ambiguity and conflicting views played a central role in his own life and in his career as much as they did in his films. He came out long before other gay artists and public figures had even begun considering doing the same, while directing films that made viewers question the benefits of coming out to such a harsh reality. In his films gay sex lacks tenderness or love but at the same

time heterosexual sex is even more “deviant”, as in the incestuous relationship between Marianna and Thomas or the sex the latter has with Apolonia in exchange for the refuge she gives him and his sister in *Bar 51*. As a filmmaker Guttman wished to achieve recognition both as an alternative voice and as a commercial director whose films would please vast audiences; he aimed both to criticize the “establishment” and to be accepted and funded by it.⁵⁷ *Himmo* is perhaps Guttman’s attempt to be accepted as an equal in Israeli society, to become canonical. Robby’s monologue in the long version of *Drifting* – in which he stresses his wish to create the first Zionist gay film but also to win the Oscar for it – is an example of an inconsistency of the self, which, at times, is also manifested in the incoherence of the cinematic text produced by Guttman. *Himmo*, for instance, functions on two levels: it is both a national fable and a “personal”, anti-national film with a prominent gay subtext.

Robby’s attempt at a relationship with a woman is destined to fail, but this attempt is part of his struggle to live and act “normally”. Robby’s married friend, Ilan, is a gay man, who goes at nights to the park with Robby. He cannot leave his wife, he says, because he cannot give up the economic support marriage gives him. “She is good to me”, Ilan says to Robby, “I need a structure. Otherwise, everything is dissolute”. Robby himself expresses a wish to get married. “Sometimes I imagine how it would feel to have a family, kids. If I could only understand why I can’t have it”. Ilan tells him to get used to the fact that he is gay, but Robby cannot accept it: “I can’t get used to the idea of growing old with a (male) partner, making tea for each other when we are seventy”. At one point a

⁵⁷ One can find Guttman’s interest in portraying this ambiguity tangentially echoing “Sirkean” themes. As Jon Halliday notes, Sirk’s preference for complex and “incoherent” characters derived from his own experience: his life in Germany at the time of the Nazi party coming to power, his second marriage to a Jewish woman and his subsequent separation from his son, whom he was not allowed to see (the son was later killed on the Russian front), and his escape to America: “[d]uring the Weimar period, Sirk rose rapidly to become a leading theatre director. It was here that he first developed his staging of the ambiguous, split characters whom he always tried to place at the centre of his film-making. I think his interest in ambiguity was accentuated by the fact that many of his close friends and colleagues became Nazis; the difficulty of trusting people – i.e., of being convinced that one knows who someone else *really* is and how they will behave under intense pressure – became a dominant factor in Sirk’s life” (4). Halliday writes about how Sirk once told him, “[t]here are two Douglas Sirks” (4). This remark can summarize, to a certain extent, the ambiguous persona that Guttman himself had. In an interview with Halliday, Sirk says: “[t]he type of character I always have been interested in, in the theatre as well as in the movies, and which I also tried to retain in melodrama, is the doubtful, the ambiguous, the uncertain. Uncertainty, and the vagueness of men’s aims, are central to many of my films, however hidden these characteristics may be” (46).

former female lover comes into his life, and she and Robby have sex, but his face remains expressionless. As much as Robby tries, the warm, protective life that heterosexuality offers is not within his reach.

The basic contradiction between the wish to be accepted and the impasse Guttman's characters reach time and again is not resolved even in *Amazing Grace*, which was made in the more liberal and progressive early 1990s and whose protagonists seem to have fewer guilt-issues about their sexuality. In the film, both Yonatan and Miki, once lovers, remain miserable: Yonatan for being deserted by Miki after he was led to believe Miki would move in with him, Miki for not being able to be in a relationship, to be loved or give love to others (in one scene, after he tries to hug Yonatan and is rejected, he says: "I didn't want us to fuck, I only wanted to hug you. Whatever I do, I'm always left alone"). Fassbinder's comment about *All That Heaven Allows* applies to the contradiction that Guttman, like Sirk and Fassbinder before him, aims to explore: "[h]uman beings can't be alone, but they can't be together either. They're full of despair, these films" (*The Anarchy of the Imagination* 79).

The inconsistency of the self, described above, can be read in Lacanian terms, as a result of the entry of the subject into the symbolic order, which is constituted by language, "the network of signifiers" (Hall, "Recent Developments" 158). By entering this order, Hall argues, the formed subject "is no longer the integral and homogeneous 'subject' of Descartes, since it is constituted by unconscious processes; it is not the unitary individual but a set of contradictory 'positions', fixed by those processes in a certain relation to knowledge and language" (Hall, "Recent Developments" 158). Guttman's films draw attention to the role of ideological discourses in the constitution of the subject. At the same time they fail to offer a real alternative, just as Annie in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* fails to make her daughter, Sarah Jane, believe she will be able to succeed in life even though she is "coloured". As Stuart Hall notes, it is "conceptually impossible to construct [...] an adequate concept of 'struggle' in ideology, since (for example) struggle against patriarchal ideology would be a struggle against the very repressive conditions in which language as such is itself constituted. No alternative model has been proposed as to how 'the subject' might be positioned in language without also being positioned in patriarchal ideology" (161).

As shown by Hall, “screen theory”⁵⁸ suggested strategies of resistance “especially for the unmasking and interruption of dominant discourses” (“Recent Developments” 161), and these strategies are similar to those which Guttman embraced in the making of his films (namely, the unmasking of the patriarchal and masculine nature, the “total reality”, of Israeli society). However, as Hall further explains, a strategy of resistance does not free one from language or, for that matter, from reigning ideology, as

it certainly does not identify the conditions for the production of alternative languages and discourses. What it appears to do is to establish a simple alternation between being ‘in language’ (and therefore, inescapably, in ideology) or ‘against language’. But a non-patriarchal language cannot be conceptualized in terms of a revolution against language *as such*: this is a contradiction in terms. (“Recent Developments” 161-62)

Guttman’s films might be “against language”, but they still exist in relation to language and ideology. This internal contradiction is manifested in Guttman’s public persona as gay activist and in his artistic vision. Guttman resisted the core of Israeli ideology, in some cases combining it with racial issues and in others, going as far as creating a completely illusory world. At the same time he was not able to free himself from the need for response, and for financial means – from the mainstream, in other words. Likewise, as much as his protagonists attempt to break away from the dominant ideology they simply cannot escape it (nor do they want to, it seems). But their attempt to “straighten” themselves with ideology fails again and again, and eventually, they either give up or die.

⁵⁸ Developed in the journals *Screen* and *Screen Education*, screen theory, according to Hall, “[t]hrough principally relating to film texts and practices [...] has far-reaching implications for the analysis of all signifying practices, as well as for the debates on the problem of language/ideology and representation. This body of work [...] draws extensively on recent French theoretical writing in a number of different fields: film theory [...] the theory of ideology [...] the psychoanalytic writings of the Lacan group, and recent theories of language and discourse” (“Recent Developments” 157).

Epilogue: The Success of *Amazing Grace* (1992)

Even though most viewers found Guttman's first two feature films difficult to accept, the reception of *Himmo* was a new low for the director. By accepting the offer to direct the film (*Himmo* was the only project of Guttman's that was a commission), Guttman tried to overcome the obstacles set by his otherness and reclaim his voice in mainstream Zionist narrative. In *Himmo*, Guttman, a misfit in an extremely heterosexist and militaristic society, dared to tell his version of the most heroic Zionist war of all, the War of Independence. Examining the event from his own distinct perspective, Guttman attempted to link different expressions of otherness and practices of exclusion. His reading of the War of Independence was a subversive one. By showing the indifference of the establishment towards its wounded soldiers Guttman pointed to the disruptions inherent in Israeli society from its very early days. The reality of Israeli outcasts in 1980s Tel Aviv was, in Guttman's eyes, a direct outcome of the seeds of social disintegration shown in *Himmo*.

With *Himmo*'s pessimistic outlook, Guttman experienced, not surprisingly, a traumatic defeat, which almost led to his own annihilation as a film director: the film was a huge commercial and critical flop. Almost all the reviews overlooked the strong connection Guttman made between Israel of 1948 and that of the 1980s. Instead, they highlighted the alleged artificiality and lack of sincerity in Guttman's attempt to describe a founding moment in Zionist and Israeli history which was clearly not his own. Even the reviews which did point out the similarity of *Himmo*'s setting to the world of marginality portrayed in Guttman's previous films, dismissed this thematic link, arguing that the situation was drastically different, mainly because *Himmo* was based on someone else's story, not the director's own. The critics' as well as the audience's response to *Himmo* was a proof that the mainstream community was not ready, in the 1980s at least, to accept a critical reading of its founding narratives, let alone a subversive reading offered by a gay director.

However, when *Amazing Grace* was released, a few months before Guttman's death and five years after *Himmo*, the director was celebrated again.⁵⁹ By portraying, once more, gay life as a sad, decadent and solitary experience leading to an inevitable death, Guttman fulfilled society's expectations of him. Describing homosexuality as painful and marginal, Guttman made *Amazing Grace* easy to accept for those who consider themselves to be liberal and open-minded. Na'chman Ingbar, an influential film critic, says in *Amos Guttman, Film Director* that he found *Amazing Grace* a great achievement since "Guttman was dealing with his own materials again", whereas *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* was, according to his account, a huge disappointment: "*Himmo* was a bit beautified, a bit artificial. The connection Guttman made between 1948 and modern times was problematic. He did not have a strong relation to Jerusalem or to the 1948 generation". Ingbar, whose opinion is representative of a wider view of these two films, merely reiterated a common view of gay men and lesbians, which at that time, the early 1990s, was still very much intact.

In a way, *Amazing Grace* and the death of Guttman marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. The late 1980s and the early 1990s brought a sea-change for the gay community, on the legal front as well as in other aspects of life. One should not overlook the links between the increased tolerance towards sexual diversity and the overall shifts in Israeli discourse in the early 1990s, from unified categories of identity and of politics towards pluralism. The Oslo Peace Accord and its subsequent optimism about a possible "New Middle East" should not be separated from the new ideologies of Identity Politics that came to the fore at the time. These shifts have been addressed in two groups of films, those of gay director Eytan Fox and a new wave of gay-themed documentaries and autobiographical films, both of which I shall explore in the following chapters.

⁵⁹ The film won the Silver Palm at Valencia (1992), Honourable Mention at Houston (1992) and Turin (1992), the Wolgin award at Jerusalem (1992), and the Critics' Jury Prize at Haifa (1993) (Kronish and Safirman 190).

Chapter 4

Gay Men and the Establishment in the Films of Eytan Fox

In December 1996 the then president, Ezer Weizman, was asked for his opinion about homosexuality and gay rights while delivering a speech to high school students in Haifa. Weizman responded: “[t]here are laws in the Bible against sodomy and bestiality [...] To turn it into something where everyone comes out of the closet, this I can’t accept [...] I like a man who wants to be a man and a woman who wants to be a woman, not a man who wants to be a woman and a woman who wants to be a man” (quoted by Walzer 14). After a week of demonstrations, Weizman issued an apology. As Amit Kama argues, the President’s apology to representatives of the gay community was an achievement in its own right. He had expressed similar offensive opinion towards other minorities and women, before, but had never bothered to apologize (“From *Terra Incognita* to *Terra Firma*” 158n31).

The strong reaction to Weizman’s anti-gay speech and his subsequent apology manifest a weakening of the traditional stance, or Labour’s (*Avoda*), Zionist ideology, which has shaped Israeli culture and society since the establishment of the state in 1948. As Ayeal M. Gross has stated, “Weizman’s longing for men who would be men and women who would be women should probably be read, not only as another expression of the familiar patriarchy/compulsory heterosexuality matrix, but also as representing Zionist ideology” (393).

Weizman did not only preach traditional Zionist values; they were embedded in his persona: as a heterosexual former pilot in the Israeli air force, who fought in many of Israel’s wars, Weizman was the perfect emblem of the “New Jew”, and a complete opposite of the effeminate Jew of the Diaspora. As such he could not possibly sympathize with the gay cause, and what it allegedly represented. But whereas a few years before a similar statement would have been

seen as legitimate or simply ignored, in the social climate of the mid-1990s it initiated a heated debate and strong opposition. Weizman's apology signaled an important change among the old elite of which he was a typical representative, as well as in the core group of gay men and lesbian activists.

In his essay "From Nation-State to Nation-----State: Nation, History and Identity Struggles in Jewish Israel", Uri Ram charts the evolution of two parallel, interlinked phenomena since the 1970s: neo-Zionism and post-Zionism, "the respective right-wing and left-wing transgressions of classical Zionism" (27). Neo-Zionism is practiced mostly by settlers in the Occupied Territories, who are represented by extreme right-wing parties (including parts of the right-centre Likud party) and regard "the Biblical Land of Israel (identified as all areas under Israeli military control) as more fundamental to Israeli identity than the state of Israel (a smaller territory defined by the 1948 'green-line' borders)" (28-29). Post-Zionism, on the other hand, is recent thinking among middle-class people whose concern is given more "to individual rights than to collective glory" (28). Historian Ilan Pappé's defines post-Zionism as

a movement of critique [...] a cultural view from within Israel which strongly criticized Zionist policy and conduct up to 1948, accepted many of the claims made by the Palestinians with regards to 1948 itself, and envisaged a non-Jewish state in Israel as the best solution for the country's internal and external predicaments. (44)

As Ram further emphasizes, both neo-Zionism and post-Zionism have their roots in traditional, or "classical", Zionism. Their novelty, however, lies in "their one-sided accentuation: neo-Zionism accentuates the messianic and particularistic dimensions of Zionism, while post-Zionism accentuates the normalising and universalist dimensions of it" (29). Together they constitute the current "post-nationalist" Israeli collective identity, divided along the lines of cultural pluralism, individualism and consumerist and post-material values. Whereas the younger, secular middle-classes welcome those changes, other social sectors, formerly peripheral, such as the nationalist-religious and ultra-orthodox groups, see them "as alarming signs of decadence and decline" (Maman, Ben-Ari and Rosenhek 4).

Situated between these two movements, traditional Zionism is struggling to win back the influence it once had. Although still the dominant social and

cultural force in Israel,⁶⁰ it is under a factual threat. As Baruch Kimmerling (*The End of Ashkenazi Hegemony*) observes, the political strengthening of groups that have been on the periphery for many years, like Oriental Jews, or were destined to be there, like Russians and Ethiopian immigrants, indicates the end of the rule of the old elite and their successors, those who invented the Sabra and who determined the profile of a country for decades. Ilan Pappé argues that “[t]raditional Zionists are now engaged in a rescue operation [...] The operation is to salvage Zionism from its neo-Zionist enemies on the right and its post-Zionist foes on the left” (45-46).

I would like to argue that the legitimacy and acceptance the gay movement has achieved since the late 1980s, and its heightened public profile are a direct outcome of the weakening of traditional Zionism and the old Ashkenazi elite that has shaped it. The Ashkenazi-Zionist elite is more threatened than ever before by ethnic, cultural and religious groups that have undermined its once undisputed reign. In its struggle to reclaim its past glory the hegemonic Ashkenazi group can no longer turn its back on lesbians and gay men, who have, mostly, fought for the right to integrate into mainstream Israeli society and adopted its core values.

Even though the gay “revolution” had at first certain elements of queer resistance, opposing the heterosexist and militarist values Israeli society was based upon, some of these elements gradually disappeared from its agenda. Instead, activist members in the gay movement have internalized heterosexist norms, hoping for social acceptance rather than social change. The films of Eytan Fox, an openly gay filmmaker who has become in recent years one of Israel’s most prolific and commercially successful directors, best illustrate this new reality. His films, and their dual role in both reflecting and perpetuating the alliance between gay men and lesbians and the Ashkenazi elite, are the main subject of this chapter.

⁶⁰ Daniel Gutwein argues that “[d]espite its decline, Zionism, founded as it is on values of national and social solidarity, is still the hegemonic ethos in Israel, providing legitimacy to its social structure and values” (225).

The Conservative Gay Revolution

The conventional explanation of the surprising and rapid changes in the status of Israeli gay men and lesbians in the 1980s and 1990s is the liberalization of Israel, a process that occurred in tandem with the continuing shift of Israeli society from socialist to liberal-capitalist values,⁶¹ as well as the beginning of the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Oslo Accord, the short-lived peace agreement between Israel and the new entity, the Palestinian Authority, evoked hopes for what Shimon Peres, the deputy of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, dubbed “the new Middle East”. The hope for regional prosperity, which grew even more after the signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in 1994, raised questions about the continued dominance of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as a conscription army, and the mobilized nature of Israeli civil life. Eyal Ben-Ari, Zeev Rosenhek and Daniel Maman have argued that “[d]espite the hard-line taken by many of Israel’s governments, many groups in contemporary Israeli society are no longer willing to grant the Israeli Defense Forces [...] its previous status of unquestioned professionalism and to view ‘state security’ considerations as the only (or primary) criteria for national decision-making” (5). These doubts opened up a space for new models of citizenry, in which the army was no longer a key element (see also my discussion of *Song of the Siren* [1994] in Chapter 2).

However, there are other versions of the success story of gay men and lesbians in Israel. In his essay on the juridical aspect of the gay revolution in Israeli culture, Alon Harel rejects the common claims about liberalization, and suggests an alternative argument. According to Harel, the legal revolution is actually based on the conservative character of Israeli society, which rests on a traditional Zionist ethos, and its heterosexist norms. Paradoxically, the wide political support for gay rights has stemmed from the wish to keep the gay community on the margins by preventing gay lobbying and visibility. For example, since the struggle to abolish the anti-sodomy law created a widespread public debate in the 1980s, one of the very few debates in which homosexuality was at the centre, conservative parties, among them religious ones, believed that

⁶¹ See Daniel Gutwein, “From Melting Pot to Multiculturalism; or, The Privatization of Israeli Identity” in *Israeli Identity in Transition*, 215-31.

its abolition would actually prevent the spread of organized gay movement and discourse. By acknowledging gay rights, Harel asserts, the mainstream parties believed they could control the expansion of the gay movement and, more importantly, keep it separate from mainstream political discourse and national agenda. Harel argues that “[t]he legal measures protecting gays and lesbians were possible because providing political support for them did not presuppose any deep transformation of the conservative nature of the Israeli society, or the norms governing its social mores” (446).

Harel agrees that some significant social changes in Israel have taken place in the past 20 years. He also acknowledges the fact that gay men, lesbians and even transsexuals are now more visible in Israeli culture than ever before. At the same time, he questions the reasons for these changes and in particular he challenges the assumption that they were the consequences of a focal ideological change namely, Israeli society becoming a pluralist society based on ideals of equality. He also questions the future success of the gay movement in Israel. According to Harel, the acceptance of the gay community into mainstream society has meant the loss of its initial militant nature and a growing opposition from conservative sectors. This will make it harder for gay men and lesbians in Israel to continue fighting for goals yet to be achieved. He claims that,

[f]uture liberal activists inevitably will find that the opposition confronting them is much more intense, and that the conservative forces in Israel realize that the dominance of heterosexism in Israel is no longer an uncontested axiom. Sexuality has been politicized and will inevitably constitute part of the political battlefield between liberals and conservatives. (471)

Harel’s arguments undermine the conventional interpretation of the Israeli gay revolution. They suggest that more than the gradual fading of conservative, militaristic and heterosexist values, it was the outcome of the old elite’s attempt to keep the Zionist narrative and its values intact by controlling alternative lifestyles that might threaten it. By appropriating otherness, mainstream culture reinforces its position vis-à-vis foreign influences. A similar point of view is taken by Russell Ferguson who argues that “counternarratives of all kinds do constantly enter ‘mainstream’ culture”. However, in the process, “alternative cultural forms

are drained of any elements which might challenge the system as a whole” (quoted by Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity* 172).

I would argue that while Harel rightly rejects the conventional narrative of liberalization, he portrays too pessimistic a picture of the Israeli gay “revolution”. His interpretation, although interesting, suggests a simplistic process in which the dominant ideology totally absorbs and neutralizes any kind of opposition in an almost deliberately conspiratorial move. It consequently leads to a defeatist view of the possibility for radical ideas to have any influence on dominant cultures.

Antonio Gramsci’s ideas on the creation and maintenance of hegemony offer, I believe, a more accurate explanation for the rise of gay politics in Israel since the late 1980s. Rather than seeing the dominant culture simply as drawing in weaker social groups in order to control and delimit their presence, Gramsci emphasizes the *interdependent* relationship between hegemonic and non-hegemonic groups in society. Since hegemony is based upon the consent of the non-hegemonic classes and social forces, it is always in need of being re-organized. Hegemony, as defined by Gramsci, “centrally involved the possibility of new articulations of political formations” (Butler, “Restaging the Universal” 29). New alliances are required in order to adjust to the changing conditions and to the activities of the opposing forces (Simon 38). New alliances are especially needed in times of crisis, when the ruling forces are endangered and therefore have to undergo dramatic changes in order to defend the current system and to prevent opposition (as does “traditional Zionism” in contemporary Israel).

Stuart Hall argues that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is particularly appropriate to advanced capitalist societies in which

the institutions of state and civil society have reached a state of great complexity, in which the mobilization and consent of the popular masses is required to secure the ascendancy of a particular tendency and in which ‘reform’ requires an extended and complex process of struggle, mastery, compromise and transformation to reshape society to new goals and purposes [...] For Gramsci, ‘hegemony’ is never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested. He distances himself from both the ‘ruling class/ruling ideas’ propositions of *The German Ideology* and the functionalist conception of ‘dominant ideology’ in Althusser’s essay [‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation’ (1969)]. ‘Hegemony’ is always the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle [...] particular outcomes always depend on the balance in the relations of force in any theatre of struggle and reform

[...] it enables us to think of societies as complex formations, necessarily contradictory, always historically specific. (36)

Whereas Harel's theory assumes a unitary, totalizing power whose ultimate aim is to deny gay visibility and discourse, an application of Gramsci's discussion of hegemony to the alliance between the Israeli gay movement and the old elite suggests a more complex situation. In Gramscian terms, the rise of the gay movement in Israel is the outcome of a bilateral process, in which the two parties – the gay representatives (mostly Ashkenazi, urban and middle class, namely people who in all but their sexual orientation already belong to the hegemonic social group) on the one hand and the hegemonic social group on the other can join together in a mutual effort to reinforce their respective standing in society.

This alliance, however, does not create a one-way street in which the gay movement is simply "drained of any elements which might challenge the system as a whole" (Ferguson, quoted by Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity* 172). While some people within the gay community, like Eytan Fox, do indeed choose to embrace the values of the hegemonic culture they have allied with, others keep on fighting for either gay-related or other causes. Those who tend to do so nowadays are mostly gay men and lesbians who come from less privileged backgrounds, and whose gay agenda intersects with other identity categories such as gender, race and ethnicity (as some of the films discussed in the next chapter attest).

Fox: A Voice of the Old Elite

The process discussed above has improved the status of every man or woman who ever experienced discrimination because of their homosexuality. However, the main beneficiaries were those who could most easily identify with the Ashkenazi elite, namely, urban Ashkenazi middle-class men, like Eytan Fox. This privileged standing as well as Fox's almost total assimilation into mainstream Israeli culture is manifested in almost all of his films.

Fox's first short film, *Time Off* (*After*, 1990), was produced when he was a student in the Department of Film and Television at Tel Aviv University. Since then he has become one of the most successful directors (at least commercially) in

Israel. He has directed two films made for television – *Ba'al Ba'al Lev* (*Gotta Have Heart*, 1997) and *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), three theatrical feature films, *Song of the Siren* (1994), *Walk on Water* (*Lalechet Al Hamayim*, 2004) and *The Bubble* (*Habu'a*, 2006) and a TV drama series, *Florentine* (1997).⁶² All of his shorter films as well as *Florentine* deal explicitly with gay reality in Israel.

However, as I shall argue, the reality Fox has portrayed in his films and TV series is based on a heteronormative, at times even homophobic, view of gay life. His films consistently marginalize or exclude certain sub-groups within the larger gay community. This contradictory approach may be seen as a consequence of the rapid social mobility some gay men have enjoyed since the early 1990s, which blunted the militant spirit of the 1980s (captured in the films of Amos Guttman and in Ayelet Menahemy's *Crows*). Simply put, once some basic battles have been won and the status of urban gay men has improved, the urgency to continue fighting has lessened.

Fox's films portray gay identity as an inseparable part of Israeli life: his characters serve in the army, usually in prestigious combat units; they feel a strong attachment to the land of Israel; they are the Ashkenazi-white future of Israeli society. Their ubiquity and "normalcy", nonetheless, jeopardizes their status as a distinct group with unique characteristics and, as yet, some unachieved goals. As Leo Bersani argues:

Invisibly visible, unlocatably everywhere: if the gay presence is threatened by absence, it is not only because of the secret (or not so secret) intentions of those who are fascinated by gays, or even as a result of the devastating work of AIDS, but also because gays have been de-gayng themselves in the very process of making themselves visible. (*Homos* 32)

Fox's films are generally inhabited by gay characters, who, unlike Guttman's characters, live in harmony with their heterosexual counterparts, serve in the army, and enjoy steady relationships. In his films, Fox does not shy away from the problematic reality of Israel; on the contrary, he uses some of the most traumatic events in Israel's recent history as the background for the individual stories of his characters. In *Time Off* it is the 1982 Lebanon war; in *Song of the Siren* the first

⁶² Due to its recent release date, I will not discuss *The Bubble* in this thesis.

Gulf War and the Scud missile attacks on Israel in 1991; in *Florentine* the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and in *Yossi and Jagger* the fatal consequence of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, as the ambush the soldiers are sent to, intended to prevent terrorists from entering Israel, ends with the death of one of the two protagonists.

Yossi and Jagger might be seen as a later version of *Time Off*, as it describes the outcome of the two decades of occupation of Lebanon. The two films, though, are inherently different. While *Time Off* engages, to a certain extent, with the political debate around the 1980s war in Lebanon (seen as the first war in Israeli history that was not imposed on Israel by enemy forces),⁶³ *Yossi and Jagger* does not. In *Time Off*, this engagement is well illustrated in the Peace Now movement demonstration in Jerusalem and in the debates the soldiers have on their way to the battlefield. Although the action of *Yossi and Jagger* takes place nearly two decades after that of *Time Off*, when the consequences of the Lebanon war were already widely known and criticized, rather surprisingly it disregards the war. This difference speaks volumes about Fox's changing position, from voicing a critical point of view to mainstream, appeasing, filmmaking.⁶⁴

Time Off (1990) and *Florentine* (1997): Blurring the National/Personal Divide

Fox's importance lies in his tendency to undermine the hierarchy between the "national" and the "personal" in Israeli society. By using national events as the background for his characters' private life, Fox blurs the rigid distinction between the private and the public spheres of Israeli life, arguing that they are interwoven and interdependent. *Time Off*, for instance, follows a platoon of Israeli soldiers as they move from basic training to the war front in Lebanon in 1982. The plot revolves around a brief moment in a recruit's life. Stopping in Jerusalem where

⁶³ As Uri Ram states, this war was the first in Israeli history to be declared "a war of choice". The war was deeply contested in Israel. The resistance to it marked "the genesis of an autonomous civil society in Israel, where state and society had usually been intimately meshed" (26).

⁶⁴ *Yossi and Jagger* is different in its approach not only from *Time Off* but also from another early Fox film, *Song of the Siren*. In his first feature film, Fox voices a fierce critique of both the military and its dominance in Israeli society and of the importance given to matters of national security, often at the expense of civil rights (see Chapter 2).

everyone gets time off, Jonathan (Hanoach Re'im), the protagonist, wanders aimlessly in the town. In a nearby park, a haven for gay men, he spots his tough lieutenant Erez (Gil Frank) cruising. Fox uses the military for staging a coming-of-age drama of sexual confusion and self-discovery, whereas the war and its implications, although discussed and criticized, are left somewhat obscured. The national cause, although referred to, is abandoned in favour of personal, allegedly more important, issues.

Similarly, in *Florentine* Tomer (Avshalom Polak) comes out to his parents while the family is watching the live broadcast of Rabin's funeral. Tomer's father (Yankale Yakobson) responds by asking whether such a "confession" should have been delivered at a time like this, thus emphasizing the importance of the state over private, individual concerns. Once again, Fox attempts to attenuate the boundaries between the private and the public, and to challenge the precedence of the national agenda.

In the same episode, Shira (Ayelet Zorer), a successful presenter of a children's TV show, experiences her own life crisis. The viewers are led to believe that her decision to quit her job and to leave her long-term partner is triggered by Rabin's death. She then goes to Jerusalem to visit the mother of Erez, her high school boyfriend, who was killed while fighting in Lebanon. Shira apologizes to the mother for not coming earlier, saying she needed to be alone, an apology to which the mother responds: "my grief is between me and him, your grief is between you and him. There is no such thing as public grief; there is only private grief. I don't want to belong to the family of bereavement".

Towards the end of the episode, Tomer visits Erez's grave. Tomer addresses his dead friend. He tells Erez about the big assembly in Kikar Malchei Israel⁶⁵ which he attended with the rest of their friends, and with Iggy (Uri Bannay), his flamboyantly gay flatmate, who will later on become his lover. Tomer tells Erez about the artists he liked the most among the participants who sang Erez's favourite songs. Of one particular song, performed at the assembly, Tomer says, "with all respect to Rabin, this is your song, this is the song your friends from the army sang in your funeral". This song, Tomer tells him, brought him, for the first time, to tears in the middle of the square. It was Iggy, standing

⁶⁵ In Hebrew, Kings of Israel Square, where Rabin was assassinated. The name of the square was changed shortly after the assassination to Kikar Rabin.



Fig. 4.1 Jonathan (Hanoch Re'im, left with guitar) in *Time Off*. DVD capture.



Fig. 4.2 The cast of *Florentine*. From www.sjff18/filmmakers/d0719d-a-2.gif.

next to him, who comforted him. "I put my head on his shoulder, and for a moment I didn't know if it was him or you, but I didn't mind", Tomer says. Tomer's confession at the grave of his friend, the combat soldier who died while fighting, and whom Tomer confuses for a brief moment with his gay flatmate, expresses a wish for the end of gay segregation in Israeli society. Iggy and Erez, who traditionally represent two extremes of Israeli masculinity, become one in Tomer's imagination.

The death of Rabin is the turning point for most of the characters, urging them to re-examine their lives and reaching dramatic resolutions. For Shira, it is the trigger that makes her leave her partner, whom she does not love, and relive the memories of her beloved dead boyfriend. For Tomer, it is the moment when he decides to come out as gay. Rabin's funeral is the background for Tomer's coming out to his parents; the memorial assembly is where Tomer gets closer to Iggy, the beginning of a relationship that marks Tomer's complete entry into the gay world. Tomer's coming out does not undermine his connection to Israeli reality and, unlike Amos Guttman's characters, does not lead to his exclusion from it. The public and the private spheres are complementary: it is in the square, amongst the enormous crowd, that Tomer finds his own private voice. It is in the midst of the Israeli collective, crying over the death of its prime minister and heroic general, that Tomer comes to terms with his gay identity.

Fox, Adam and Steve

Fox's films are the most striking example of a desire for rapprochement between gay men and the establishment. Fox's cinema at once reflects and contributes to this process of legitimizing the gay community, "the minority everyone loves" (Grant 7). However, Fox opts for a fixed gay identity, modeled on the dominant heteronormative majority, and refuses to acknowledge any differences among gay men, and the gay population in general.

Despite the temporal proximity of the different Israeli civil rights branches and organizations, such as the Israeli feminist movement and the Black Panthers, they did not coalesce into one unified movement. The gay movement has remained, for the most part, an exclusively Ashkenazi male organization. As

progressive as it was in transforming the status of homosexual subjects and practices in Israel, it did not fully embrace principles of equality, especially with regard to Mizrahi Jews, and women.

This phenomenon is not unique to Fox or to Israeli society. Like many other aspects of Israeli gay life, it has been influenced by American gay politics. As David Higgs shows, the more vocal the gay presence becomes in certain US cities, the more opposition arises among gay men, lesbians and transsexuals to the glorification of the “Adam and Steve” model of gay life favoured by the American media:

‘Adam and Steve’ was inappropriate to various categories under the umbrella of the gay identity. The sadists and masochists, people of color, those who did not dwell in dyads and other clusters of diverse sexual agendas did not all recognize themselves in the media formulation of the gay life. (7)

Higgs predicts that as a result “[t]he tacit imposition of a white, consumerist, US male couple as the appropriate paradigm for gay lives in urban Europe and elsewhere may not long continue into the third millennium” (7). The success of Dana International, both a transsexual and of Mizrahi origin¹¹¹, in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1998 is one example of such a change in Israeli gay culture.

Fox’s embrace of Zionist heteronormative values goes beyond his act of “de-gaying”, to use Bersani’s term, gayness. Fox also adopts the exclusionary attitude towards racial and ethnic minorities held by the old Israeli elite. In so doing, he perpetuates the exclusion of the traditional “other” of Israeli society, namely Oriental Jews, from mainstream society. This attitude towards exclusion is necessary for the creation of a pseudo-homogeneous gay identity. In Fox’s view, the gay movement in Israel can work only if it agrees with the terms of the dominant Ashkenazi regime. Consequently and ironically, given the fact that these are gay-themed films, after all, Fox’s films resemble in more than one way the pre-state Zionist films such as *Adama* (Helmer Lerski, 1947). These films excluded both the “old”, supposedly feminine, Jew of the European Diaspora and the Oriental Jew, calling instead for one model of desirable masculinity.

Fox’s characters might have a different sexual identity, but they are mostly Ashkenazi, they are straight-acting, and they aspire to lead straight-seeming lives.

The main limitation of Fox's representation, therefore, is that the empowering of gay men can only be achieved at the expense of others: the Arab, the Mizrahi Jew, the "sissy" homosexual. By trying to impose a heteronormative lifestyle on a specific group of gay men (Ashkenazi, middle-class), Fox repudiates many gay men who do not belong to this category. Fox's films illustrate the process described by Diana Fuss, in which "identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity" (quoted by Ed Cohen 76).

The following sections of this chapter offer close readings of Fox's *Gotta Have Heart* (1997), *Yossi and Jagger* (2002) and *Walk on Water* (2004). The first film intersects sexual and ethnic identities. *Yossi and Jagger* deals with questions regarding gay men and the military experience, and possible patterns of gay relationships. *Walk on Water*, although gay-themed, moves gayness away from the Israeli nationalist discourse altogether. The three films suggest gay existence can be justified or excused only as long as it adopts a heteronormative, hegemonic set of values and practices of exclusion.

***Gotta Have Heart* (1997): Fox and the Discourse of Orientalism**

Gotta Have Heart (originally entitled *Ba'al Ba'al Lev*, literally "a husband with a heart") tells the story of a group of young Israelis, whose lives are at crossroads. Guri (Tsak Berkman) is waiting to hear whether he has been accepted to architecture studies in the prestigious *Bezalel* school; Nohav (Uri Omanuti) hesitates over whether he should join the army or move to Tel Aviv instead; Mitzi (Osnat Hakim), Guri's best friend, is in a search of a man with "good husband qualities"; and Merito (Sami Huri) is the dark Arab Jew, a mysterious stranger whom almost everyone desires. Nohav is secretly in love with Guri, but the latter is more interested in Merito. Mitzi is also attracted to Merito, and gets to sleep with him first. Disillusioned by the experience, she realizes Merito is not a good husband material, and settles for someone else. Guri goes through a similar realization. After having sex with Merito he recognizes that it is actually Nohav whom he likes.

I would like to argue that by focusing mainly on the character of the Arab Jew and bisexual Merito the film perpetuates the colonial view of the non-European's body and affirms the restricting concept of "gay identity" as it was first developed in the US. Although presented as a film that celebrates liberal values, *Gotta Have Heart* follows a long tradition of misrepresentations of Mizrahi Jews as members of the exotic yet primitive Orient. With *Gotta Have Heart* Fox constructed a film, which "attempts to fix the position of Mizrahi male subjectivity into a space that mirrors the object of Ashkenazi needs and desires" (Yosef, *Beyond Flesh* 166).

As a postmodern tale about gay desire, the film blends Israeli militaristic symbols with salient gay tokens. In so doing, it arguably blurs the rigid boundaries between "gay" and "straight", and undermines macho Israeli society. But what seems at first an attempt to broaden the notions of "gay" and "Israeli" identities is soon revealed to be an affirmation of the fixed, rigid meanings of these concepts.

The film is framed as a fantasy: there is nothing realistic in the deliberately artificial-looking studio set designs; the dialogues are over-dramatic, and often rhyming; and the exact time and place of the events are left obscure. There are a few benchmarks that link it to the present or the near past (openly gay identity, Eurovision music from the last three decades, references to Chelsea Clinton), but the set is reminiscent of a rather more distant past, mainly the 1950s. It portrays an Israeli reality in which there are no enemies or wars, but a quiet life in an agricultural village. The main attraction of the young protagonists who live in this dream-like environment is the daily dancing in the community centre to the sound of Eurovision song contest music and, as a defiant contrast, to the sound of old Israeli songs that bear significant ideological Zionist connotations. The protagonists' stories unfold as a clichéd coming-of-age drama, in which teenagers come to terms with adulthood, their professional expectations and most importantly, their sexual preferences.

Gotta Have Heart is a comment on the impact the American gay movement had on its Israeli counterpart. The film celebrates this influence to the extent that it depicts the Israeli experience through an all-American filter. By using and referencing all-American cultural tokens (from the American-styled hot dog stall where Guri and Mitzi work to Nohav's declaration that the only thing

Americans need in order to make their life complete is the Eurovision Song Contest), the filmmaker shows his longing for a life designed according to the “American dream”, emphasizing Israel’s inclination towards the West and its rejection of Middle Eastern culture. As Ella Shohat has argued,

[t]he paradox of secular Zionism is that it ended a Diaspora, during which all Jews presumably had their hearts in the East – a feeling encapsulated in the almost daily repetition of the ritual phrase ‘next year in Jerusalem’ – only to found a state whose ideological and geopolitical orientation has been almost exclusively toward the West. (3)

According to Shohat, one of the reasons for that is European Jews’ dominance over the Mizrahi population, and Palestinians (3-4). The plot, characters and set design of *Gotta Have Heart* emphasize the film’s disassociation from Middle Eastern Israeli actuality. But it is mainly through the exclusion of the character of Merito, whose both colour of skin and “ambiguous” sexual orientation stand flagrantly in opposition to the Western ideal, that the film’s colonial stance is revealed.

Colonizing the “Savage”

Merito is portrayed as the ultimate object of desire. Both Mitzi and Guri are attracted to and seduced by him. But despite his attractiveness, Merito is a solitary and confused character. Although he takes part in the daily dancing ritual, where he entices his accidental partners for the night, he is not rooted in the place like the other characters, or for that matter, in Israeli culture. His foreignness is symbolized by his non-Israeli name, which is in contrast to the Israeli-Sabra name that Guri bears.⁶⁶ His place of origin, occupation, past experiences and future plans, likes and dislikes all remain unknown. When asked by Guri about his past he refuses to answer, and only says he is about to leave again, this time for Tel Aviv. His sexual encounters lack any sincere feeling of affection. His sexuality is the power he uses over those who surround him. It is only through his sexuality,

⁶⁶ Like Merito, Mitzi is also a non-Israeli name. The film, however, focuses on the formation of masculine identities. Thus, the male characters’ names bear a greater symbolic significance than Mitzi’s.

accentuated by his sensuous appearance and body language that he becomes visible to others. In the majority of the scenes he wears tight, sleeveless outfit with a low neckline. At the beginning of the sex scene with Guri, he appears almost completely naked, lying on a bed with his legs spread apart, waiting for Guri to arrive.

Edward Said has argued “that what is really left to the Arab after all is said and done is undifferentiated sexual drive” (311). As an Arab Jew, Merito is portrayed exclusively through his sex drive. He is outside the civilized order and in the realm of “the savage body”. Examining the work of nineteenth-century English writer Richard Burton, Rana Kabbani argues that he, like other European writers,

shared his century’s belief that ‘Savage Man’ (a term that could incorporate all non-European peoples) was a creature of instinct, controlled by sexual passions, incapable of the refinement to which the white races had evolved. He was so distinct from them that he could well be another species altogether. The native was more like an animal; indeed, Burton often spoke of African and Arab man and beast in one breath. (63)

As Yosefa Loshitzky points out, “this nineteenth-century colonial view of the body of the non-European other as a ‘savage’ was carried over more or less intact into twentieth-century literature” (*Identity Politics* 95).⁶⁷ As the example of Fox shows, traces of the notion of “the savage man” can also be found in Israeli cinema made at the end of that century.

The sex scene between Guri and Merito is an aggressive demonstration of power. First, it is Guri who is seductively asked by Merito to come by his house. “You know where I live”, he tells Guri, implying an acknowledgment of Guri’s attraction to him. When Guri arrives at Merito’s place, the latter takes a watermelon and breaks it in half, a suggestive act realized in the anal sex which indeed follows. Merito eats the watermelon with his bare hands, an act that emphasizes his wildness, his being outside the borders of civilized decorum.

⁶⁷ In her analysis of *My Michael* (1974), Yosefa Loshitzky observes the eroticisation of the “noble savage” in the film, in this case manifested by a fantasized interracial relationship between the Ashkenazi-Jew female protagonist and Arab twin brothers. The film is an example of the shifting perception of the Orient by the Ashkenazi, Western-inclined elite in Israel: if at the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine, before the establishment of the state, the view of the “other” was a “romantic utopian view”, it was gradually replaced by “the fetishization of ‘low-class’ (both Arabs and Oriental Jews) ‘objects of desire’” (*Identity Politics* 99).

Although Merito's savagery has the power of seduction, it is Guri who is on top, the "active" partner in the intercourse scene that follows, suggesting that the act of colonization of the "other" by a white man is taking place. On the binary "active-passive" Alan Sinfield writes: "it must be remembered that these are ideological constructs, not natural attributes, and that their primary function is sustaining the prevailing pattern of heterosexual relations" (49). In the heteronormative relations that Merito and Guri have, Guri is the "man" while Merito is feminized. The sex scene is about power and conquest for both sides: Guri uses his "white" superiority and gets to fuck Merito, but it is Merito, thanks to his exotic sexual allure, who summons this scene in the first place. The forceful nature of their sexual act is further emphasized by the strobe lights that flicker throughout it.

Merito is depicted as the "other" in the film not only because of the colour of his skin and Oriental features, but also because he refuses to adopt a clear gay identity. By doing so he rejects what Raz Yosef calls "the Ashkenazi narrative of 'coming out'", which "privileges gay identity as the most important task of any homosexual". According to Yosef, "[i]t might also be true to argue that for Mizrahi homosexuals coming from a working-class background, gay identity is not always the prime target" (*Beyond Flesh* 170). Merito stands for non-Western otherness in his appearance as well as in his sexuality.

The film attempts to mark out a local gay identity according to the Western project of gayness. While transgressing the dominant Israeli, militarist discourse in favour of the once unpopular articulation of gayness, which has been traditionally portrayed as a threat to Zionist values, the film shows an intolerant approach towards transgression of the rigid Western gay identity, as represented by the character of Merito. His obscure, almost non-existent personality is a result of his otherness, expressed both by his ethnic, non-European origin and his refusal of a fixed, clear-cut sexual identity. Merito is an example of how the sexual and the racial cannot be distinguished. As Ian Barnard argues, "race does not exist independently of sexuality (and vice versa) [...] particular sexual identities are considered in conjunction with specific racial attributes" (129).

Merito's portrayal, which emphasizes both his indiscriminating sex drive and his passivity and rootless existence, derives from the Orientalist discourse, as mapped by Said. According to Said, "[a]n Arab Oriental is that impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to paroxysms of over-stimulation –

and yet, he is as a puppet in the eyes of the world, staring vacantly out at a modern landscape he can neither understand nor cope with” (312). A similar binary regarding Black men is delineated by Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer. They argue that

[t]he gay subculture [...] is dominated by the needs and demands of white males. Black men fit into this territory by being confined to a narrow repertoire of types – the supersexual stud and the sexual savage on the one hand, the delicate and exotic ‘Oriental’ on the other. The repetition of these stereotypes betrays the circulation of ‘colonial fantasy’. (quoted by Gove 11)

Unlike Merito, Guri accepts a clear sexual orientation, although he does not believe in the possibility of being gay *and* leading a happy life. The character of Guri represents the clash between gayness and Zionist-Israeli masculinity. Guri is torn between his forbidden desires and his wish to integrate into the virile Israeli atmosphere. Although outspoken about his gayness, he plans to marry his female best friend Mitzi if they are both still single by the time they are in their mid-thirties, and to have children with her. He also believes that serving in the army and becoming an architecture student, whose task, like that of the Jewish pioneers in Palestine, is to reclaim the desert and build Jewish land, is of great importance. Guri’s character presents the difficulty of reconciling these seemingly contradictory traits.

More than the other characters, that of Nohav corresponds to the Western idea of what it means to be gay. He hopes to leave his small town for Tel Aviv, depicted as a city of opportunities and freedom. He does not think of joining the army, as he cannot accommodate the army life to his homosexuality. His obsession with the Eurovision Song Contest, a kitsch musical event that has become a significant gay and camp token in Europe and in Israel, symbolizes his inclination towards the West and away from the local, militarist mentality he was brought up in. At the same time, he appreciates Israeli culture, and is equally obsessed with Israeli folk music and dancing. Furthermore, his decision to consider enlisting in the army after all, encouraged by Guri’s insistence that he should do so, suggests his attempts to reconcile his gayness with local reality. His character conveys the message that reconciliation is indeed possible: one can be an Israeli and a proud gay man at the same time.

Guri's initial reaction to Nohav calls this possibility into question: Guri is hostile to Nohav because he is too "sissy". When Guri visits Nohav at his home, Nohav tells him of his dream to live happily ever after with the man he loves. Guri says that this will never happen, because he is different: "You will have to accept the fact that you will never get married and that you will not have kids". Although accepting his gayness to a certain extent, Guri views the heterosexual blueprint of marriage and children as the only framework that can bring happiness and can make one's life complete. His alienation from Nohav's universe, which exceeds the boundaries of Israeli existence, musically and idealistically, is manifested by his disapproval of Nohav's idea of evading military service, as well as by ignoring him in a gay club in Tel Aviv (as he later ashamedly admits to Nohav).

Even though he is portrayed as an all-Israeli man, who has served as a combat soldier in the army and is about to start his architecture studies at a prestigious institution in Israel, it is Guri who needs, at the end of the film, to reevaluate his life. His decision in the last scene to dance with Nohav and not with Merito is a statement that makes his gay identity clear, for him and for others. By choosing Nohav over Merito, Guri also rejects the confused, incoherent sexual identity and ethnic otherness Merito represents. While dancing, a short sequence shows Guri and Nohav as long time lovers in the future, a reaffirmation of Nohav's fantasy of living happily with his partner. The music they are dancing to – a Eurovision hit and an old Israeli folk song – is sung by Mitzi, who imitates the two original female performers. This scene is a materialization of yet another fantasy of Nohav's, told earlier to Guri, in which his two favourite divas sing, synchronically, their most famous songs. In his fantasy, Nohav builds a bridge between East, represented by the Israeli-Yemenite singer who performs an old Israeli folk song, and West, represented by the French singer singing her Eurovision hit. This is a bridge between local and global, heteronormative and gay existence, proving these immanent differences can be reconciled.

However, the character of Merito undermines this reading. More than the others, Merito, with his undefined sexuality and mixed cultural influences, represents the potential of hybridity, which "resists the binary opposition of racial and cultural groups [...] as homogeneous polarized political consciousnesses" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 207). But Merito's potential is not fulfilled.

Having neither past nor future, Merito is merely used as a vessel to illuminate the colonial desires and fears of others.

The film borrows from colonial discourse by representing the character of Merito as the dark, sexually confused seducer, who comes from nowhere and whose future is unknown even to himself, as opposed to the other characters who have clear vocations: Nohav, it is implied at the end of the film, will probably join the army, while Guri will begin his architecture studies; Mitzi, on the other hand, will get married and bring up children, future soldiers, as she declaims to Guri.

Although *Gotta Have Heart* advocates gay rights and the integration of gay men and lesbians into Israeli institutions such as the army, Fox opts to portray gay existence from a narrow perspective, primarily Ashkenazi and middle-class. *Yossi and Jagger* takes this tendency a step further in eliminating any notions of “sissiness” or effeminacy from Israeli male gay identity, suggesting it is only straight-acting gay men who can, and should, be accepted into mainstream Israeli society.

***Yossi and Jagger* (2002): The Reappearance and Disappearance of the Sissy Jew**

Homosexual desire and the negotiation of gay identity within a hostile environment stand at the heart of *Yossi and Jagger*, a short Israeli gay-themed drama. Originally produced for Israeli TV, it became one of the most popular Israeli films of 2002. It received mostly favourable reviews, and was shown in 2003 at numerous film festivals around the world (among them the Berlin International Film Festival and the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival), following the major commercial success of its limited preview theatrical release in Israel.

The film, set in an outpost near the Lebanese border in the late 1990s, depicts the secret love affair between Yossi (Ohad Knoller), a young company commander, and his deputy Lior (Yehuda Levi), nicknamed Jagger, “because he looks like a rock star”, as explained in the film. Following the unexpected visit of Yoel, their chauvinistic colonel (Sharon Raginiano), Yossi learns that he and his soldiers will launch another ambush the same night, the third in a row. Yossi’s

attempts to change the colonel's decision fail, and his fears are fulfilled: the ambush ends fatally at dawn, with the death of Jagger.

Even though the film was released into a relatively receptive social climate (the outcome of a series of legal battles in the previous two decades), it was largely perceived as breaking new ground as it gave the marginalized the right to rewrite their role in Israeli culture from which they have been excluded. The portrayal of a gay love story between two men, who happen to be IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) officers, was perceived as controversial also because the IDF authorities refused to assist the filmmakers with the production.

The filmmakers were taking a step further the implied homoerotic feelings that often characterize male bonding, "feelings of desire and affection between members of the same sex, but not necessarily their physical expression" (Ellenzweig 57). Although homoerotic relationships had been portrayed in earlier Israeli films as an immanent part of the military experience, actual gay relationships in this environment were seldom explored, probably because of the army's official anti-gay policy, which was finally changed only a few years ago. Even though Israeli gays and lesbians have never been officially restricted from serving in the army they could not serve in certain "sensitive" positions, in which their sexual orientation was considered a security risk.

The film, however, reinforces the existing power structure: as I shall argue, *Yossi and Jagger*'s covert message reaffirms the old regime, which oppresses gay men, and constructs them as the "other" of a heterosexist society. Although the spectator may tend to read it at first as a subversive work, the film actually rules out a real possibility of gay existence, both in military and civilian life.

The IDF serves as a quintessential symbol of a male-dominated, homophobic society. The army is more than a functional organization; it is the people's army, an all-Israeli cultural signifier. As Baruch Kimmerling observes, the military has become an inseparable part of civilian life in Israel, as large portions of the hegemonic political culture have a military minded orientation (Kimmerling "Militarism in Israeli Society" 123-40). Thus, the prohibition of gayness in *Yossi and Jagger* should be seen as a statement about the position of gay men in contemporary Israeli society in general, rather than about the particular circumstances of the military. It is probably for this reason that Fox

chooses not to take a clear stand on the actions of the Israeli military: it is the cultural significance of the military within Israeli society that he wishes to explore more than the orders it carries out.

It is important to note, however, that the lack of explanation of the fighting can be read as a statement against the occupation and Israeli policy. Naming the outpost *Havatsselet* (Hebrew for lily) and using the word *Perach* (flower) to describe a casualty in a code language, as well as the portrayal of the colonel, are ironic comments on the horror of an unnecessary war and the attempt to euphemise it with propaganda. Furthermore, Jagger's death is rendered superfluous, as the piece of land the soldiers are protecting was in fact returned to Lebanese control after the time represented in the film. In many of the heroic-nationalist genre films, which were very popular in the first two decades after the establishment of the state of Israel, as Ella Shohat has suggested, the concluding Israeli triumph was a result of "numerous heroic acts of individuals whose death was necessary for the birth of the nation" (59). In *Yossi and Jagger*, however, Jagger's death does not lead to a triumph, but quite the opposite, it delineates an unnecessary loss that is followed by an admission of a failure, namely Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. At the same time *Yossi and Jagger* adopts the one-sided, agitprop view of the prolonged Israeli-Arab struggle that was explored in previous heroic-nationalist films. As in *Give Me Ten Desperate Men* (*Havu Li Asara Anashim Meyuashim*, Pierre Zimmer, 1964), for instance, so too in *Yossi and Jagger*: "the Arabs do not appear in the film but perform the narrative role of abstract agent of death, since it is an Arab mine that kills the hero's beloved" (Shohat 60). This confusion indicates not only the uncertain position of the film concerning state-politics issues but also its lack of clarity on political sexual issues. Just as Fox does not take a clear stand on Israel's contribution to the escalating situation, he is torn between his wish to challenge existing sexual norms and the impossibility of escaping them.

When it is not silenced, the love affair between the two protagonists in the film adopts the heteronormative model. The gay voice and body are stereotypically constructed in the film, and they are eventually eliminated, both literally and metaphorically. Thus, the controversial display of intimacy between two men does not fulfill the promise for a progressive view of gayness. Two pivotal scenes in the film best exemplify the tension between what is seen on the

screen and what is actually implied. In the first scene, which I shall refer to as the snow scene, the two lovers, Yossi and Jagger, leave the compound for an isolated area where they consummate their desire.

The Snow Scene

It is only outside the borders of the military compound, hence metaphorically outside the borders of society, that Yossi and Jagger's love can thrive. Their isolation from Israeli society is symbolized by the white snow, which is not a typical sight in Israel, better known for its warm weather and desert landscape. The place where they are lying is not only an alien landscape, but in fact it is not occupied by Israel any more. The IDF had withdrawn from these territories two years before the film was produced. Even if it is just a coincidence, it nonetheless intensifies the feeling that these two lovers do not belong in the Israeli narrative or the Israeli landscape. Furthermore, the fact that this particular scene, like most of the film, takes place in an area that the IDF had occupied, an act that was widely condemned as immoral and wrong, both inside and outside Israeli society, implies that Yossi and Jagger's love, parallel to the act of occupation, may be perceived in the same way. The film does not provide a "safe" locus for gay love/desire. It is dangerous to be or act gay within the boundaries of the consensus (the military compound) but it is also highly dangerous to cross them. The place where Yossi and Jagger consummate their love is not the peaceful haven it seems to be but a part of a battle zone, not too far from where Jagger eventually meets his death having been detected by the enemy.

Although there are verbal references in the film to the alleged sexual potency of gay men, there are no explicit sex scenes. The sperm stain on Jagger's uniform confirms the two had sex, off-screen. The boundary between what is seen and what is left off-screen is not unintended. In his analysis of Andy Warhol's 1964 film *Blow Job*, Roy Grundmann writes:

the film's self-censorship separates not only the visible from the invisible but also the acceptable from the taboo. Thus, the frame's function can be considered a conceptual analogy to a guard patrolling the (metaphorical) border between civilization and barbarity, rigorously regulating its

permeability, ardently stemming the tide of unregulated eros on behalf of civilization's course: Only what passes for 'advanced' may cross over. (43-44)

The "metaphorical" border Grundmann mentions in regard to *Blow Job* becomes an actual border in *Yossi and Jagger*: their sexual act is external to the border of the frame as well as to the border of the state of Israel. The area where they make love is the place of the uncivilized, with a rabbit, which the two lovers spot, as a symbol of wild nature and the lurking terrorists, who are not seen in the film, and whom the spectator becomes aware of through the events that follow, as a symbol of barbarity.

The moderate and suggestive love scene is another reason for questioning the presumed controversial nature of the film. It is reasonable to assume that had the film dealt with heterosexual lovers more graphic scenes would have been included. Nonetheless, this scene delineates the strict gender role division that is to be found in Yossi and Jagger's relationship. This division is an adoption of a linear, generic model of sexual identity formation, which cannot accommodate the dynamic and fluid nature of sexuality that queer politics aims to explore, and as such is also heavily based upon a stereotypical, hetero-centered outlook on gay men: Jagger is the "femme", Yossi is the "butch", in the tradition of the seventies' gay macho "clone" look, "whereby gay men", as Richard Dyer has argued, "no longer saw themselves as intrinsically different from their objects of desire but made themselves into those objects of desire" (*Now You See It* 112). By sticking to this heteronormative portrait, the filmmakers reaffirm Dyer's claim that

even where no gender inflection or exaggeration is involved, no sissiness or man-manliness, relations between men always take place in a world where distinctions are drawn between men and women – it is virtually impossible to live, imagine or represent sexuality between men as if it is not informed by awareness of the difference between men and women. (*The Culture of Queers* 5)

The role-oriented division between the two – Yossi the muscular, rational commander versus Jagger, his effeminate, sensitive, and irrational deputy – is meticulously constructed throughout the film. The snow scene implies the protagonists' sexual roles although it is far from being explicit. Unlike the sex



Fig. 4.3 “Is this rape, sir?” Yossi (Ohad knoller) is the “top”, Jagger (Yehuda Levi) is the “bottom”. DVD capture.

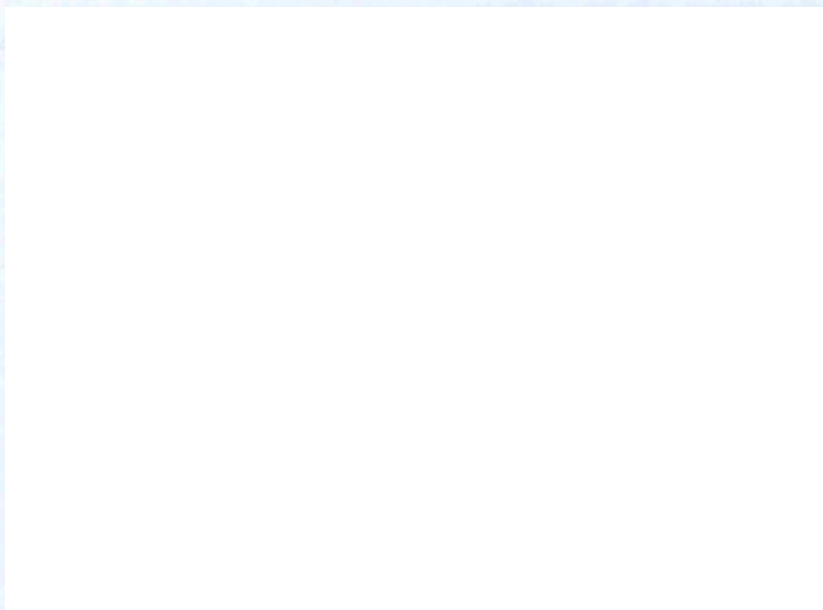


Fig. 4.4 The sperm stain on Jagger’s uniform confirms the two had sex, off-screen. DVD capture.

scene in *Gotta Have Heart*, it does not include actual intercourse.⁶⁸ At the same time, like the scene from *Gotta Have Heart*, the snow scene delineates the power balance between the two protagonists: Yossi is the “top”, the active lover, whereas Jagger is the “bottom”, the passive one, traditionally perceived as connoting femininity and powerlessness. The clear-cut division is heightened by Jagger, who, while his body is under Yossi’s, asks ironically, “is this rape, sir?” The spectator’s gaze is mediated through Yossi’s gaze which symbolizes the power Yossi is exercising over Jagger. Yossi knows, however, that he will lose his status in the army if he comes out. His power as a commander is granted to him as long as he keeps pretending to be someone he is not. He trades his true self for his position. Gay power is not allowed in the film: as Jagger attempts to force his wishes on his long-time partner, namely that they both come out, he is punished and dies.

In his analysis of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Querelle* (1982), Richard Dyer observes how social sex-power is embodied in homosexual intercourse:

the person who fucks is powerful and the person who is fucked is powerless. Fucking and being fucked are the means by which power is asserted or relinquished. Both may provide pleasure, but the pleasure of being fucked is the pleasure of humiliation. It is in the fucking that the social realities of sex power – of gender, of heterosexual status – enter into gay desire. (*Now You See It* 91-92)

Dyer points out the marking of the characters in the film “in terms of masculinity/femininity, above all through the equation fucker=male, fuckee=female” (*Now You See It* 92).

As has been stated, gay intercourse is not present in *Yossi and Jagger*, but the strict division described by Dyer is reflected in that scene in which Yossi is physically on top of Jagger, unzipping Jagger’s coat, discovering he is not wearing his uniform underneath and telling him that he (Yossi) usually puts his men in jail for less than that. Even though this remark is spoken lightheartedly, just before they start kissing, it comes as an affirmation of Yossi’s dominant and masculine character compared with the feminine Jagger, who is at his mercy. Both

⁶⁸ A possible explanation for the less graphic sex scene in *Yossi and Jagger* compared to that in *Gotta Have Heart*, made five years earlier, is Fox’s growing desire to reach wider non-gay audiences, as well as his more established standing in Israeli film industry.

positions serve as stereotypes fashioned by hetero-social norms, debasing the efforts to expand the concept of “gayness” and sexuality in general.

By playing the role of the masculine, heterosexual soldier, Yossi reflects the national discourse. His masculine traits are even encapsulated in his typical Israeli name. In comparison, Lior’s nickname, Jagger, a non-Israeli name, refers to Mick Jagger’s ambiguous sexual persona. On the surface, the character of Yossi is the manifestation of the ideal muscular Jew, envisioned by Zionist Max Nordau (see Chapter 1), and, cinematically, a link in a long chain of characters that convey, in the words of Yosefa Loshitzky, “a powerful eroticized counter-image to the diasporic Jew” (*Identity Politics* 1). His character embodies the eternal connection of the warrior, muscle and heterosexual Jew to his ancient land.

By contrast, Jagger is represented as an irrational and impulsive character who, in insisting on coming out and therefore on putting his own needs and ambitions before the interests of the state, violates the normative, heterosexual power balance. Jagger’s gestures and good looks (one of the soldiers tells him “you are beautiful like a girl”) suggest that he is more stereotypically gay than Yossi, and contribute to the reading of his body as feminine, an outcome of an ideology that, in the words of Lee Edelman, “throughout the twentieth century, has insisted on the necessity of ‘reading’ the body as a signifier of sexual orientation” (*Homographesis* 4). The marking of Jagger’s body as “different” is a result of “the homophobic insistence upon the social importance of codifying and registering sexual identities” (Edelman, *Homographesis* 4). Even though not necessarily suspected of being gay (he is not humiliated by his fellow soldiers, but it might be his higher position that prevents the others from questioning his sexuality in public), Jagger is perceived as the “other” from the beginning, and his otherness will eventually lead to his death.

Yossi manages to avoid being marked. He masks his homosexuality and becomes his own self-oppressor. This is illustrated in the scene where he blackens his face, camouflaging himself, before setting out on the ambush. As he examines his reflection in a broken mirror, a symbol of his fragmented, homosexual self, he adds even more camouflaging paint, although his face is completely blackened already. The uniform and rituals that create the ethos of the military as the ultimate melting pot experience by blurring any racial, socio-economic or educational differences between soldiers are also a device to blur his

homosexuality and to produce “a flawless surface of conventional masculinity” (Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 163).

Dressed in his uniform, putting on an act as straight commander, Yossi is “safe” in as much as he reveals the undisputable connection between performativity and masculinity. He passes for straight, that is, only because of his clothes and acquired gestures. This performativity is emphasized at one point in the film, in which Jagger – angry with Yossi after the latter refuses to come out with him and blames him for not caring about their militaristic, nationalist cause – mocks Yossi, declaiming dramatically archaic macho phrases like “yes sir, let’s kill some charlies, sir!”

The fear of being marked leads Yossi to play down his homosexuality to the extent of total non-visibility and even absurdity: Yossi, whose secret is known only to his lover, is threatened even by the presence of a rabbit that is watching him and Jagger. The rabbit symbolizes both cowardice (the Hebrew word for “rabbit”, *shafan*, means also “coward”) and unbridled sexuality at the same time, implying Yossi’s internal conflict between his gay sexual drive and his fear of fully accepting it.

Yossi’s masculine traits, as opposed to Jagger’s “femininity”, are manifested mainly when the latter insists that they come out together. This option is unacceptable for Yossi, who wishes to pursue a career in the military. His determined refusal suggests that gay love is an irresponsible act that may jeopardize his career. By demanding that they come out together and then celebrate in a hotel room with one “queen-size bed”, Jagger establishes the domestic-familial space, stereotypically related to femininity and therefore, gayness, that stands in contrast to the militaristic-masculine space Yossi occupies, a space that cannot accommodate his non-normative sexuality. Thus Yossi tells Jagger they can either keep going on his terms, discreetly, that is, or break up: “I am sorry I don’t surprise you with a ring, it is not an American movie”, he says. His gayness is a dream or a fantasy, and just like a Hollywood film it differs from reality.

The two lovers are aware of the role division between them, and they refer to it throughout the film. As they lie in the snow, Jagger starts singing along to his favourite song, which happens to be playing on a small portable radio he has brought. The song “Your Soul” is sung by Rita, whose dramatic pop music and

ultra-feminine appearance made her one of the most successful female singers in Israel and a gay icon. As the viewer expects, Yossi does not share his partner's love for Rita: "your musical taste is so gay", he tells him. Jagger then accuses him of preferring Meir Ariel to Rita. Ariel, the late Israeli singer, was an archetype of the Sabra, who made derogatory comments about homosexuals in an interview in September 1998 (Walzer 35).

The connection between Yossi and homophobic Ariel stresses his self-hatred. In this sense, the lyrics of Rita's song – which bear an even more explicit gay connotation because Hebrew, as opposed to English, for instance, marks gender explicitly – and which are sung loudly by Jagger and addressed to Yossi, are the essence of how Jagger sees his lover. The lyrics describe a life of lies as a dark and lonely experience, encouraging the addressee in the song to come to terms with his own "true" self:

Let's dispel the foggy curtain
Let's stand in the light, not in the shadow
Until when will you keep on running?
To games of power.
You can cry sometimes,
When you break inside.
Tell me about your moments of fear;
It is much easier to be afraid together.
When cold winds will storm outside,
I will send hot fire through you.
One day you may stop running
Between the shadows
In your soul.

It is no wonder that two versions of the song – the original and a cover version recorded by Ivri Lider, a popular and openly gay Israeli singer – are played several times, in addition to the twice it is sung by Jagger. The latter alters the lyrics, changing them into "it is much easier to stick it up the rear", and by doing so, emphasizes the original lyrics' covert gay meaning.

It is important to note that in all of Fox's films the use of music in the soundtrack is paramount. Female singers' voices, Eurovision pop music and Israeli folk songs all carry a special meaning in Fox's cinema. For Fox, music is the "excess" that the lush Technicolor and *mise-en-scène* of the melodrama were for Douglas Sirk, namely a tool to imply that the film is reaching beyond

dominant narrative structures. Although the majority of Fox's films present lucid gay themes, they often correspond with dominant, heteronormative ideologies. The use of music is an act of subversion that allows him to hint at a different reality.

In his analysis of *Time Off*, Raz Yosef explores the way in which the gay experience, namely the relationship between the soldier and his commander, is denied at a visual level, but then surfaces and is reconfirmed at an aural level.⁶⁹ According to Yosef, music in *Time Off* "becomes an instrument through which the two men, distanced by ranks and Zionist ideals of proud Sabra heterosexual masculinity, subvert the oppressive military phallic laws and express queer identification" (*Beyond Flesh* 160). In a place where the visual image of the "other" is distorted, the voice serves as a potential alternative. According to Yosef, Fox's understanding of the limitations of the cinematic frame for establishing a gay subject within the patriarchal ideology of popular cinema, led him to make use of the aural dimension. I would argue that Fox's use of soundtrack often offers a compromise of a sort between his wish to appeal to a wide non-gay audience and the desire to construct a gay subjectivity on the screen.

The Death Scene

The first and last time Yossi softens is when he realizes that Jagger has been injured, and is dying. Jagger's death, the emotional climax of the film, enables Yossi to come to terms with his own sexual identity, implying a possible fissure in the wall of silence. In these moments, while waiting for rescue, he tells Jagger things he never dared say before. He declares his unconditional love, not the least bothered by the presence of another officer, who, for the first time, realizes the two officers are lovers.

This self-realization follows a prevalent universal pattern in gay narratives, in which, in the words of David M. Halperin, "the weaker or less favored friend dies [...] Death is the climax of the friendship [...] and it weds them forever [...]"

⁶⁹ See Chapter 5 of Raz Yosef's *Beyond Flesh*, 154-63.

death is to friendship what marriage is to romance” (78-79). Thomas Waugh reinforces Halperin’s claim by arguing that death is a narrative device used to make sure the gay romance will not last:

the same-sex imaginary preserves and even heightens the structures of sexual difference inherent in Western (hetero) patriarchal culture but usually stops short of those structures’ customary dissolution in narrative closure. In other words, the protagonists of this alternative gay rendering of the conjugal drive, unlike their hetero counterparts, seldom end up coming together. We don’t establish families – we just wander off looking horny, solitary, sad, or dead [...] gay closures are seldom happy endings. (“The Third Body” 145)

This pattern is especially prominent in Israeli films that deal with homosexuality. According to Raz Yosef, the disposal of the homosexual body is inevitable, in order to keep Israeli heterosexual hegemony intact (“The Military Body” 26).

Jagger’s death is the first time Yossi adopts some of Jagger’s “reckless” behaviour, as he breaks the barrier between the public and the private, the domestic and the military, while rushing to Jagger not as the latter’s commander but as his grieving partner. This gesture could be read as an irrational and emotional, and therefore feminine, reaction, at odds with what the spectator has learnt to expect from Yossi. Unfortunately, this moment of self-realization can only be experienced at Jagger’s death.

However, it is important to note that the film defines a gay identity, not so much by portraying homosexuality as natural and neutral, but rather by denouncing heterosexual courtship and relationships as hollow and abusive, employing the same arguments usually made against gay men. The two gay lovers in the film are ironically shown to be more committed than their fellow soldiers. The latter either replace intimacy with abusive sex, as is shown in the power-oriented sexual relationship between Goldie (Hani Furstenberg), one of the female soldiers, and the married colonel (her declared refusal to commit herself to a relationship – “I am here to have fun, not to get married” – is probably more a protection against hurt than a sign of liberation); or else they cannot reach their love objects: Yaeli (Aya Steinovitz), the other female soldier in the film, who is desperately in love with Jagger, remains blind to the fact that he is gay. Like the others, she can read the signifiers, describing him as “gentle” and “different from



Fig. 4.5 Yossi examines his reflection in a broken mirror. DVD capture.

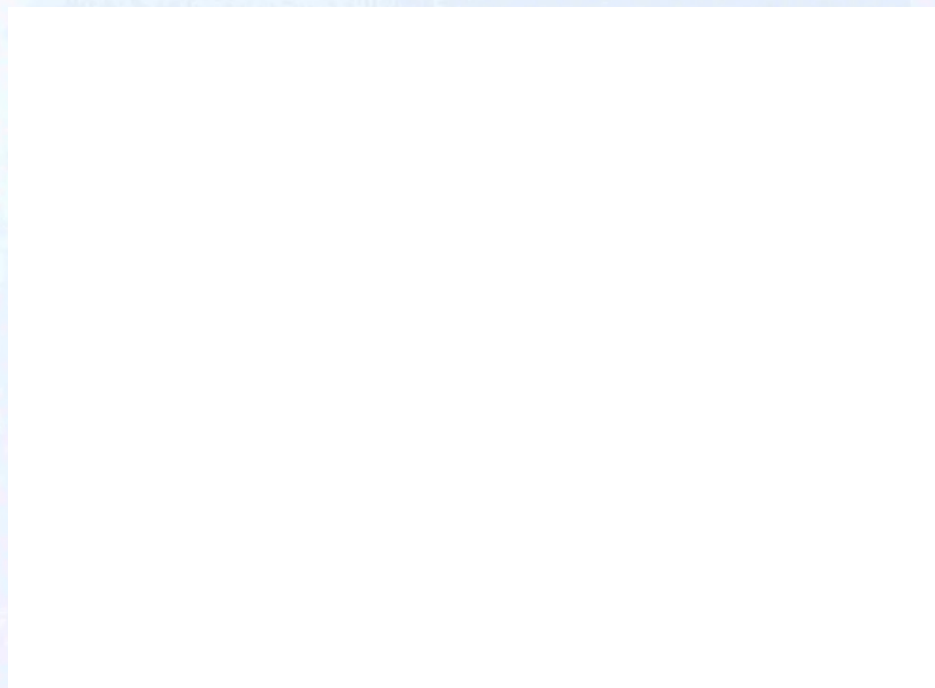


Fig. 4.6 Yossi and injured Jagger. DVD capture.

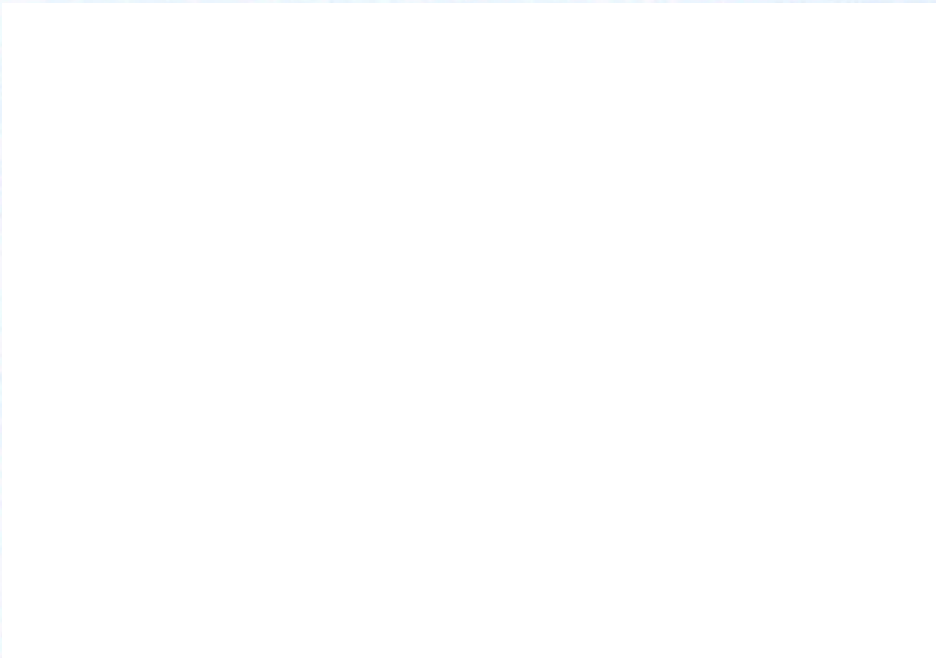


Fig. 4.7 Yaeli (Aya Steinovitz, left) and Goldie (Hani Furstenberg), the female protagonists of *Yossi and Jagger*. DVD capture.



Fig. 4.8 The colonel (Sharon Raginiano) refers to the news about the upcoming ambush as good news. DVD capture.

all the other men”, but fails to interpret them. As a gay couple, Yossi and Jagger adjust themselves to the heteronormative model, and they succeed in doing so more than their heterosexual counterparts. The latter are conventionally stereotyped: the colonel abuses his power and the female soldiers are either whores or virgins. Thus, they become a grotesque representation of chauvinistic norms.

Reversing the norm in Hollywood films, it is the straight characters in *Yossi and Jagger* who illuminate the gay protagonists and are used as a critical reflection of heterosexual, militaristic morals.⁷⁰ Being the primary target, the colonel not only cheats on his wife with one of his soldiers, but also abuses his power in order to do so. At one point in the film he orders his sex partner to move her “fat ass to the car”. The colonel refers to the news about the upcoming ambush as good news, stressing how much he likes “the action and the smell of burnt flesh in the morning” although he is not there with the soldiers to smell the burnt flesh the following morning.⁷¹ When Yossi tries to change the colonel’s decision, the latter accuses him of becoming a “homo” and a “sissy” and of worrying about his soldiers as if he was their mother (thus, stereotypically connecting homosexuality with cowardice and motherhood, hence femininity). In his reaction to what will prove to be justified concerns, the colonel reveals not only his unenlightened opinions regarding women and homosexuals but also his erroneous judgment.

The character of the colonel and the longing of the other soldiers for love that is not within their reach reflect the shortcomings of straight relationships compared to the stability and warmth that are to be found in the relationship of Yossi and Jagger. Furthermore, Yossi’s judgment is proven to be better than the colonel’s, suggesting that although Yossi is the misfit in a heterosexist system he can surpass those who are supposed to be superior to him in the military hierarchy. The film, therefore, inverts the balance of power between

⁷⁰ Describing almost every Hollywood (i.e., commercial) film, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that “[w]hen queer characters were depicted, they were usually relegated to minor parts and/or were the butt of jokes, by contrast reinforcing the central and socially appropriate nature of the heterosexual love story” (Benshoff and Griffin 6).

⁷¹ The colonel’s remark is an allusion to the famous sequence in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), in which American helicopters fire missiles and drop mustard yellow smoke bombs while Colonel Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall, announces: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning”. This reference suggests that the IDF actions in Lebanon were comparable to the American army’s actions in Vietnam, a comment that stands as one of the very few in the film made against war and its implications.

homosexuality and heterosexuality, in which the former is implicitly superior to the latter. This power struggle, however, takes place within a heteronormative domain and adopts heterosexist morals. The greatest achievement of Yossi in the film is his false attempt to play down his sexuality in order to pass for straight. It is Jagger who tries to break with his self-imposed silence, an act for which he is killed, and it is the disposal of his marked body that secures the existing power structure.

Jagger's death and the discretion that is an immanent part of Yossi and Jagger's partnership violate the idyll. In the end the militaristic and homophobic structure remains intact, and even Jagger's grieving parents, in the final scene of the film, are kept in the dark as to their son's sexuality. In the *Shiva* (a period of seven days' mourning) Jagger's mother (Yael Pearl-Beker) says to her son's fellow soldiers that it is only now after his death, that she realizes she did not know him at all. This saying may be interpreted as an expression of a remote feeling she might have that behind the "normative" appearance there was something different about him. The fact that only Yossi knows Jagger's favourite song implies a fracture in the concealed existence of both Yossi and Jagger. To seal this concealment of Jagger's true nature, Yaeli declares her love for Jagger at the *Shiva*, adding she believes he felt the same for her, although they had never talked about it. Jagger's mother is left with the belief that her son had a girlfriend, that he was "normal" by society's standards. Although far from the truth, it is suggested that the parents are better off this way.

Disguised in their uniforms, suffering in silence until the death of Jagger, the two protagonists prove gay men can be a part of Israeli society as long as they accept the heteronormative order and keep their love a secret. The significance of "transplanting" a forbidden desire into the army is undermined by the realization that they surrender without a fight to heterosexist norms. More than anything, *Yossi and Jagger* attests to the difficulty for gay men in Israel to create a new, different vision. If the word "queer", as argued by Ellis Hanson, "invites an impassioned, even an angry resistance to normalization", and "is a rejection of the compulsory heterosexual code of masculine men desiring feminine women" (4), *Yossi and Jagger* is anything but a queer work. The film was made by a gay activist filmmaker, known for encouraging famous Israeli artists to make their sexuality public, yet it only shows how prevalent heterosexist norms are to the

extent that they have become internalized by members of the gay community itself.

***Walk on Water* (2004): Israel's Gay Arch-Enemies**

Even more than his previous films, Fox's *Walk on Water* illustrates his engagement with burning issues on the Israeli agenda. This time, Fox attempted to link themes such as the memory of the Holocaust and Second Generation Israelis, Israeli current affairs, the threat of terrorism, and homosexuality. The large number of topics raised throughout the film discards the possibility of in-depth discussion of any. Instead, the film offers superficial portrayal of the conflicts within Israeli society and between Israelis and Palestinians. The main protagonist, Eyal (Lior Ashkenazi), a *Mossad* hit man, is on a mission to track down an ex-Nazi officer. Working undercover as a tourist guide, he befriends Axel (Knut Berger), the gay grandson of his suspect, who is on a visit to his sister in Israel. During an extended tour of the country, the two men struggle to find some common ground. In order to complete his mission, Eyal goes to Berlin, where he is invited to the grandson's family party.

As in previous films, such as *Song of the Siren*, Fox offers flat characterization. In this film, he counters the macho but sensitive and conscientious Israeli *Mossad* hit man with the liberal, gay young European. More importantly, the film demonstrates a hidden homophobic sentiment, whereby homosexuality is "transferred" to the arch-enemies, past and present, of Israeli society: the two gay characters in the film are Axel, the German tourist, and Rafik (Yousef "Joe" Sweid), a Palestinian he meets in a Tel Aviv club. Like *Merito* in *Gotta Have Heart*, Axel and his Palestinian sex partner are marked as "others", and their otherness is manifested, among other things, in their alleged promiscuity. It is not just the single night they spend together that suggests it: in a later scene in the film, Axel counts the many partners he has had and classifies them by their nationality, while in another scene, talking to his sister, he mentions a brief relationship that he had. Infatuated, Axel left Germany for Italy to live with his lover, but came back within a fortnight. His promiscuity is highlighted by the

background of his sister and Eyal's monogamous natures. As much as promiscuity can be seen as a defiant cultural practice against oppressive heteronormative ones, it has had negative connotations since the appearance of the AIDS epidemic, and even before that. Promiscuity is an ambiguous matter not only within dominant, heterosexual discourses (where "'promiscuity' now conventionally connotes 'excessive', 'indiscriminate', and often 'insatiable' sexual practice" [Gove 6]), but also in gay circles, and is normally marked as the less desired model for gay men. Ben Gove writes:

black and white gay male discourses alike have often had a comparable antipathy towards the term, particularly since the profound backlash against gay sex/uality that much of dominant culture has desperately latched on to in order to 'rationalise' the HIV/AIDS crisis [...] Yet this gay male distrust of the term has also been pronounced since at least the 1960s, when, as Steven Seidman notes, dominant discourse (as earlier in the century) 'often assumed ... the inherently promiscuous, carnal nature of homosexual desire, a sign of its pathological or deviant status', or else responded to the actual growth of opportunities for publicly avowed gay male promiscuous sex during the 1970s and early 1980s in the same demonising manner. (13-14)

Leaving aside the debate about whether or not promiscuity is a model which gay men should follow, I would rather like to emphasize its negative associations both within and outside the gay world. Taking into account Fox's adherence to heteronormative patterns discussed in previous sections of this chapter, it is safe to assume that he did not intend to use promiscuity as a means of defying the culture that he so wishes to represent. Indeed, not since *Time Off* have Fox's Ashkenazi protagonists sought casual, promiscuous sex. This terrain is reserved for "others". Rather Fox's all-Israeli protagonists have always been, or longed to be, part of a heterosexual-normative, monogamous, relationship.

The film revives the old myth of Jews in Israel as both victorious warriors and victims. On the one hand, the dialogues between the *Mossad* agent and Axel explain to non-Israeli viewers what it is like to live under a constant threat of terror, and seek to convince them that the true victims of the situation are the Israelis. On the other hand, the film also seeks to portray Israelis as powerful and "in control". The opening scene, in which the *Mossad* agent kills a man described in the film as a Hamas activist, is one example. The use of Israeli music in the

film also conveys this message: it accompanies most of the scenes, including those in Berlin (Israeli music, for example, is played in the car Eyal is driving in the city). Similarly, the Israeli folk-dancing scene in the villa in West Berlin, not far from where the decision on the Final Solution was taken, marks a symbolic victory of Jewish spirit over those who wanted, and others who still want, to destroy it.

Like *Yossi and Jagger*, *Walk on Water* embraces the heteronormative order, and defines some of its most prominent symbols as signs of both mental and physical health. Shortly after he returns to Israel, having successfully carried out a secret mission in Turkey (the “elimination” of the Hamas activist in front of his wife and child), Eyal discovers that his wife has committed suicide. In the note she had left for him she wrote that he kills everything near him. Her death, the spectator is led to believe, evokes a strong emotional reaction in Eyal although he tries to conceal it. His commander is insistent that he should go see a therapist, and his poor results in training imply that he suffers from depression. While in the process of mourning the death of his wife, Eyal is asked by Axel whether he has children. Eyal says that he does not and rules out the possibility he ever will. However, in the epilogue which takes place two years after the main events portrayed in the film, he is seen waking up to look after the newborn child he has had with Pia (Caroline Peters), Axel’s sister and the granddaughter of the former Nazi officer. The marriage of a second generation of Holocaust survivors from Berlin and the granddaughter of a Nazi criminal conveys a hope for some kind of reconciliation between the two nations. The common child symbolizes this and more: reproduction represents Eyal’s life choice. Overcoming his depression, he has decided to quit his job in *Mossad*, which is, fundamentally, about killing people, in favour of agricultural work in the *kibbutz*, and has brought a child into the world. This is, the film suggests, the ultimate symbol of happiness and normalcy.

But while the spectator is introduced to Eyal’s new heteronormative, nuclear family, there is no sign of Axel. Through an email that Eyal sends him, the spectator learns that he is living abroad with his partner. Homosexuality, which has been displaced from the Jewish-Israeli body to those of Judaism’s and Israel’s arch-enemies, namely the Palestinian and the German, is also, towards the

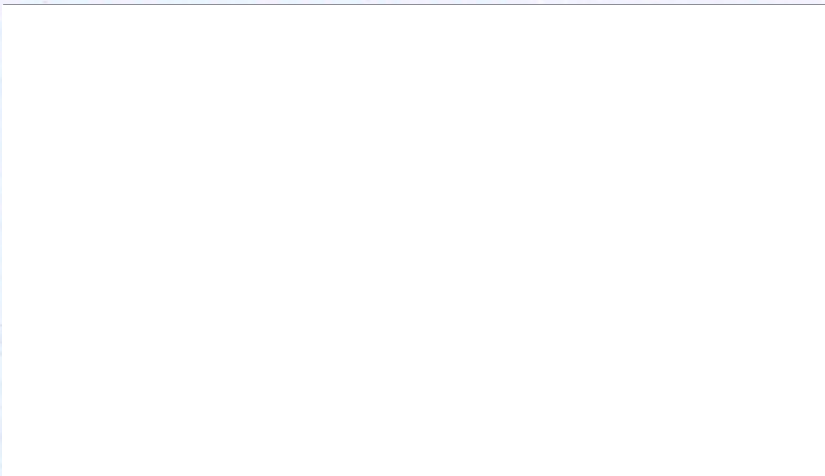


Fig. 4.9 Israeli folk-dancing in the villa in West Berlin in *Walk on Water*. DVD capture.

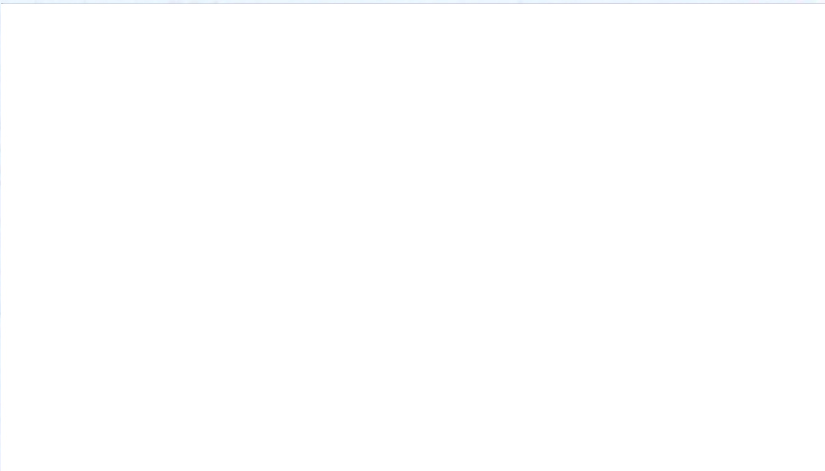


Fig. 4.10 Promiscuous lovers. Axel (Knut Berger, left) and Rafik (Yousef “Joe” Sweid) in *Walk on Water*. DVD capture.

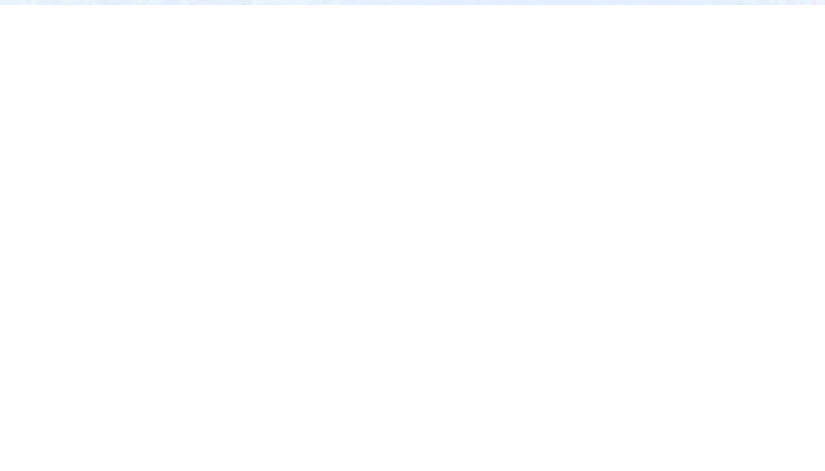


Fig. 4.11 Eyal (Lior Ashkenazi) and his newborn in *Walk on Water*. DVD capture.

end of the film, pushed outside the borders of the Israeli state, as much as it is pushed outside the borders of the cinematic frame.

The conflicting approaches towards gayness in Fox's films, *Walk on Water* in particular, is further demonstrated by the filmmaker's politics of casting. Whereas in Guttman's films at least some of the actors, most notably Boaz Turjeman and the late Ada Valerie Tal, were gay, Fox, although he has touched on gay themes in almost all of his films, has rarely chosen self-professed gay actors for gay roles. Interestingly, one of the few openly gay actors to have taken part in a Fox film is Knut Berger, who plays Axel. As stated above, by shifting homosexuality and gayness away from Israeli roles, and actors too, Fox exposes in his work an unresolved tension between Israeli wholesome life and gayness. Ella Shohat has pointed out that the majority of Mizrahi characters in *Bourekas* films were played by Ashkenazi actors, such as Haim Topol, Yehuda Barkan and Gila Almagor (135-36). Thus, self-representation was denied. By the same token, I would like to argue that Fox's almost systematic choice of heterosexual actors for gay roles denies gay self-representation.

As in some of Fox's previous films, the heteronormative message of *Walk on Water* is challenged by a subversive use of music. Eyal's favourite singer is Bruce Springsteen. Axel, on the other hand, prefers to listen to female singers. The musical clash between the two is of a gendered kind: the masculine, rough sound of Springsteen versus the delicate voice of Italian singer Gigliola Cinguetti. However, throughout the film, Eyal learns to like female voices, and when he arrives in Berlin he offers Axel an Israeli album by a woman singer as a present. Although music is a tool to explore Eyal's "feminine" side, this exploration only leads to the reinforcement of a heteronormative institution: it is Eyal's total transformation and rediscovery of his "softer" (hence, feminine) side that enables him to marry Pia and have a child with her. Axel is coupled as well, but his progress from a state of promiscuity shown at the beginning of the film to stability is only briefly mentioned.

Concluding Remarks

In the short history of gay filmmaking in Israel, Amos Guttman and Eytan Fox are often regarded as its two pivotal figures. Although equally influential, the two directors' respective styles and agendas could not be more different. Whereas Guttman made a point of emphasizing the distance between the gay minority and the Israeli collective, Fox has made a name for himself as the gay filmmaker whose films set out to prove that the two can live together. Whereas in Guttman's films the protagonists are excluded from the Israeli collective, in Fox's films they are engaged in what is taking place around them, they are an inseparable part of their surroundings. They fight and get killed for the national cause (in *Yossi and Jagger*); they dance to Israeli folk music (in *Gotta Have Heart* and *Walk on Water*); they are part of the crowd mourning the tragic death of Rabin, the 'architect of peace' (in *Florentine*).

The "normalization" of the gay community and the shift from the "ghettoized environment" in Guttman's cinema to a total integration into Israeli society, shaped by its conflicts, patriotism and grief, is Fox's trademark. He insists on showing gay men (lesbians and trans-gendered people do not appear in any of his films) as an equal, in some cases even a superior, group in Israeli society. However, his films undermine this very goal. This is manifested in narrative choices, in which the gay story often "succumbs" to heteronormative, mainstream conventions, reflecting gay men's dependence on hegemonic culture rather than their equal standing, and in Fox's politics of casting. It is their "surrender" to heterosexual norms that has contributed to their popularity among non-gay audiences in Israel and abroad. Indeed, the impact Fox's films have had on non-gay viewers cannot be underestimated: both *Florentine* and *Gotta Have Heart* were produced for Channel 2, which until 2002 was the only commercial TV channel in Israel, and by far the most popular one. *Yossi and Jagger* was produced as a short film for Israeli cable TV, but its preview screenings in cinemas in Israel were, unexpectedly, an enormous success.

Fox's films reflect the change of status of certain gay groups in Israel. *Time Off* was made in the midst of the gay legal "revolution" and a few years before the restrictions on recruitment of gay men to certain units in the army were

fully lifted. Therefore, the film expresses a certain degree of militancy, especially in its political stance towards the war in Lebanon. His more recent films, however, already reflect the alliance between the old elites and the gay community. The contradictory approach Fox takes in those films regarding gayness, namely the simultaneous celebration and denial of it, suggests a confused position from which he creates. As both Fox and the gay establishment become more accepted it becomes harder for both to challenge what still needs to be changed. This task, it seems, is now in the hands of the less privileged and less well-established young filmmakers.

Like Guttman, Fox and his films have become a reference point for many new filmmakers who portray gay life in Israel. It is this influence, among other tendencies, I would like to explore in the last chapter, which is dedicated to new gay documentary filmmaking in Israel.

Chapter 5

In Person: New Israeli Non-Fiction Gay Cinema

In the past two decades Israeli cinema has been characterized by an increased interest in the private domain. The focus has shifted away from grand, national narratives to personal stories about individuals or minority groups who have been, after long battles, granted their own agency. If early Israeli cinema was a major tool in forging a national identity in the first decades after the establishment of the state, contemporary Israeli cinema has gradually become an important site where a fragmented society and identities are explored. There were, of course, precursors. The “personal cinema” of the 1960s, the Tel Aviv films of Uri Zohar and the gay-themed films of Amos Guttman were all significant cultural events that questioned and challenged the mobilized character of Israeli society long before it became a common practice to do so. However, the steady decline in the last two decades of uncontested conformity has meant that “personal cinema” in Israel is now more prominent than ever before.

The new Mizrahi cinema illustrates this trend. After many years of stereotyped representation of Jews who emigrated from Arab countries in *Bourekas* films, which were mostly written and directed by Ashkenazi filmmakers, the 1990s and 2000s signaled a shift in the mode of representation. Films like *Shchur* (Shmuel Hasfari, 1994) and *Late Marriage* (Dover Koshashvili, 2001), both of which are fiction features that portray non-Ashkenazi communities from within, have been publicized as autobiographical, in contrast to the earlier portrayal of these communities.⁷²

Amy Kronish and Costel Safirman have shown how personal existential dilemmas have become a prevalent topic in many recent Israeli films, a development which stems from “the new emphasis on human portrayals of the ‘now’ generation” (15). One of the main beneficiaries of this new trend, they

⁷² See Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen*, 72-89.

argue, is the gay community, and the growing number of gay-themed films made in Israel every year bears this out.

It is no coincidence that the majority of gay-themed films produced in Israel in the past decade are non-fiction. The shift towards the personal, which has led to further meditation on the construction and expression of selfhood (vis-à-vis national and/or collective identities), has also manifested itself in a search for new cinematic forms of self expression, namely documentary (sometimes autobiographical or essayist, “a mode of autobiographical practice that combines self-examination with a deeply engaged outward gaze” [Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* 69]) and “hybrid” films. Laura Marks has defined hybrid cinema as a cinema “in which autobiography mediates a mixture of documentary, fiction, and experimental genres [...] the film production of people in transition and cultures in the process of creating identities” (quoted by Loshitzky, *Identity Politics* 87).

Recent years have seen young filmmakers examine previously unexplored aspects of gay life in Israel, using the “authentic” appeal of the non-fiction film to great effect. This has been facilitated by their predecessors’ achievements: Amos Guttman’s pioneering cinema and Eytan Fox’s commercial success have generated interest in gay-themed films. Moving on from both Guttman’s isolation from and Fox’s embrace of Israeli core values, these new filmmakers have broadened the boundaries of the discourse, taking the social and cultural acceptance that the gay community has achieved for granted. Once some of the initial struggles fought by the gay movement had been won (such as the passing in December 1991 of a bill outlawing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation [Fink and Press 9]) other questions and dilemmas could be brought to the fore, such as gay parenthood, male prostitution, and AIDS. Equally important is the production of lesbian narratives. For years, Israeli gay cinema focused solely on the male experience. But the current wave of gay non-fiction filmmaking in Israel has paved the way for lesbians to narrate their life experiences.

The economy of film production has played a significant role in the rise of gay non-fiction films. Documentaries usually do not require large financial

investment as there is no need to employ professional actors or build sets.⁷³ Makers of autobiographical non-fiction films often use relatively low-cost digital videotape. The majority of these low budget films then find the way into television broadcasting. The Israeli state channel's loss of its monopoly to a wide range of channels (public, cable and satellite) has generated many more hours of broadcasting and the creation of many more niche audiences. Furthermore, the arrival of commercial TV in Israel in 1993 created a new TV culture that comfortably housed this type of film. Influenced by the American and British culture of talk- and reality-shows, local TV production has adopted a "confessional" mode, in which the personal (the more bizarre and unique the better) has been celebrated. It is only ironic that two decades after the ban on Ron Asulin's moderate gay-themed drama *A Different Shadow* (1983) due to its provocative content, Yair Lev's *Yakantalisa* was rejected by the same channel for being "boring", as claimed by the then head of documentary, Natan Kaspi (*Ha'ir* 23 Aug. 1996). According to the film producer Yael Shavit, the film – which tells the life story of artist Hezi Leskly, who died of AIDS in 1994 – was not "juicy" enough (*Ha'ir* 23 Aug. 1996). In a prescient essay "Israeli Television and the National Agenda", published in 1995, Yuval Elizur predicted the impact that the proliferation of channels would have on Israeli society: "television will lose its 'agenda setting' role. No longer will it be able to exercise a unifying influence or concentrate the public's interest around national goals" (116). Indeed, the majority of the films discussed in this chapter were made for television.

The films I have chosen not only touch on a wide variety of themes; they also present different modes of filmmaking and storytelling, from the more traditional "talking heads"-style documentary (*Yakantalisa*) to experimental docu-drama (the short *Last Post* [*Michtav Meuchar*, Anat Dotan, 1997], which mixes fiction with non-fiction techniques). It is precisely the variations of themes and forms in these films that are indicative of the plurality of modern Israeli gay experiences (shaped, among other factors, by ethnicity and class), and the different, often contradictory, directions in which they are heading.

⁷³ The filmmaker Yair Lev, for instance, whose film *Yakantalisa* (1996) is discussed in the chapter, said in an interview with *Zman Tel Aviv* that his idea of making a documentary came after his attempts to raise money for his fiction feature film fell through (Lev Ari 45).

Non-fiction Film and the (De)construction of Gay Identity

The increasing number of gay documentaries and autobiographical films produced in Israel stem not only from growing interest in gay stories, but also from a universal shift in the form of the documentary film, which is directly related to the strengthening of the politics of identity. Keith Beattie has argued that the greater commitment to promoting personal issues of sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity in recent years has led to a stronger need for the expression of self and identity in autobiographical forms of filmmaking (105).

Michael Renov has dubbed the period of documentary filmmaking since 1970 “post-vérité”, one in which “the documentative stance that had previously been valorized as informed but objective was now being replaced by a more personalist perspective in which the maker’s stake and commitment to the subject matter were foregrounded” (*The Subject of Documentary* 176). According to Renov, the emergence of a politics of identity has meant that “the clarion call to unified and collective action came to be drowned out by the murmur of human differences” (*The Subject of Documentary* 177).

During the preceding Direct Cinema period, which inclined towards “objective” observation, the presence of the filmmaker was silenced. This, Renov suggests, was “the symptomatic silence of the empowered [...] white, male professionals” (*The Subject of Documentary* 181). The self-enactments of the current generation of documentarists are a transgressive act. Their self-referenced films speak the lives of those who have lived outside “the boundaries of cultural knowledge” (Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* 181). A particularly vital and dynamic element within this trend, Renov suggests, is a growing group of gay filmmakers who, rather than conforming to any particular template, test and try new ways to explore their sexual and cultural identity (*The Subject of Documentary* 180). Trying to define non-heteronormative identities, or to defy notions of fixed identities altogether, gay documentary and autobiographical films (made by both gay and heterosexual filmmakers) become “queer”; they tend to blur boundaries, mix genres, and create new modes of filmmaking. The blurring of distinctions between documentary and fiction as two separate genres reflects the blurring of lesbian and gay sexualities as discrete identities, and is accompanied by the celebration of queerness as a postmodern strategy of

confounding identity. In this sense, contemporary gay non-fiction films are often more interested in deconstructing or questioning gay identity than in constructing/corroborating it. These films, and the filmmakers, indicate “the myriad possibilities of representational tactics available to apprehend [...] very elusive subjectivities” (McHugh 225).

The many techniques that some gay non-fiction films employ attest to the elusive, undefined quality of the “truth” they come to convey. In their cinematic approach and narration, the filmmakers make a point of rendering the films’ artificial, constructed, discursive nature as transparent as possible. The films expose the fabrications, prejudices and artifices that dominate our culture and shape the ways we perceive ourselves, as well as others. This is particularly important when addressing stigmatized sexual identities such as gay men, lesbians and transsexuals, for the queer’s aim is to unmask the ways in which society constructs identities and labels its subjects. The films allow us to explore further the ways in which one rewrites one’s self, interprets one’s life, and gives meaning to one’s existence, especially when one is a gay man, a lesbian or a transsexual.

One of the aims of this chapter, therefore, is to explore the tendency of some new Israeli gay documentaries to playfully cross the line between fiction and non-fiction, and consider what ends it serves. I will attempt both to tackle the uniqueness of these films as postmodern artefacts, which blur the once clear distinctions between the objective and the subjective, and to examine the nature of their contribution to the notion of gayness in contemporary Israel. It is important to note that not all the films included in this chapter follow these experimental lines. The majority of them, formally, at least, are conventional documentaries. However, a few of the filmmakers, most notably Anat Dotan and Elle Flanders, mobilize new means of documentary filmmaking, such as dramatization and incorporation of “found” footage. Their films constitute a link between formal experimentation and the challenging of identities.

The diversity of the films considered in this chapter, classified as non-fiction, calls for different categories of analysis, based on thematic and structural principles. As all of them are based on personal life stories, questions of the biographical/autobiographical status of their narratives might be raised. For the following categories of analysis, I have preferred to use the term “autobiographical film” only when the filmmakers are also the characters in the

films documenting their own life experiences. Two of the selected films, *Say Amen!* (*Tagid Amen!*, David Deri, 2005) and *Almost There* (*Kim'at Sham*, Sigal Yehuda and Joelle Alexis, 2004) are discussed in this category while in other cases films that might fit this description are categorized differently, either because the autobiographical elements in them are challenged or their presence in the film works towards other purposes (as in *Zero Degrees of Separation* [Elle Flanders, Canada, 2005], for instance).

The first three categories in the chapter relate mainly to biography/autobiography:

1. Hybridity: non-fiction and its dramatization (*Last Post*).
2. Essayist films: the autobiographical turn in Israeli gay cinema (*Almost There*, *Say Amen!*).
3. Performativity and performance: staging sexual and national identities (*It Kinda Scares Me* [Tomer VeHasrutim, Tomer Heymann, 2001] and *Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me* [*Edinburgh Lo Mechaka Li*, Erez Laufer, 1996]).

The following three are thematic categories:

4. Representations of AIDS: living with and dying from AIDS in 1990s Israel (*Positive Story* [*Sipur Chiuvi*, Ran Kotzer, 1996] and *Yakantalisa*).
5. Alternative Parenthood: the demise of gay partnership (*Family Matters* [*Mishpuche*, David Noy and Yoram Ivry, 2004]).
6. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gay identities and practices (*Zero Degrees of Separation*, *Gan* [Ruthie Shatz and Adi Barash, 2003]).

***Last Post* (Anat Dotan, 1997): Fables of the Reconstruction**

The short film *Last Post* was written and directed by Anat Dotan as her final project at the Sam Spiegel Film School in Jerusalem. It was first screened in 1997. The film is an elegy for Amos Guttman, with whom Dotan had a professional and personal relationship. Like Guttman, whose films are largely based on his life story, Dotan deals in her film with real-life events but employs fictional

storytelling devices. The emphasis is on dramatization in the form of restaging, reconstruction and reenactment of events. As the actress Sigal Tzuk, who plays her in the film, declares in a voice-over at the beginning: “His films were always about himself. He didn’t know how to make films about anything else. I think that was another thing that connected us. He told me to make films so I could tell my stories”.

Like Guttman’s *Drifting, Last Post* draws the spectator’s attention to the gap between reality and its imaginative, distanced reconstruction. Dotan does not try to create the illusion of autobiographical transparency. On the contrary, she critiques the notion of an accessible and verifiable personal history. Judith Butler has stated in the new preface to her book *Gender Trouble*, that while she does not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, “it does draw attention to the difficulty of the ‘I’ to express itself through the language that is available to it” (xxiv). Drawing on this, Dotan opts for a richly constructed account of selfhood, which is as playful as it is opaque. This allows Dotan to conflate personal revelation with a broader socio-cultural critique.

Dotan mixes genres, and crosses the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, meditating on the artificial, reconstructed quality of our memories and histories. As she moves away from the traditional documentary style into a performative⁷⁴ section (and then back, towards the end, where a short clip of the “real” Guttman shortly before his death is shown), she points to autobiography as, in the words of Keith Beattie, “an act in which the author ‘performs the self’” (109).

Using dramatization and reenactments, Dotan offers her unique interpretation of real events as she remembers them, expressing her longing for her dead friend. The film stresses the importance of the way we think about the past rather than the accuracy of our memories. As Marita Sturken has observed, writing about the production of cultural memory, “[w]e need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present” (2). It seems that more than “objective” documentation of past events, the film, or rather, the making of the film, had a therapeutic function for Dotan, and

⁷⁴ I use the term “performativity” after Judith Butler. Suggesting we perform our identity (gendered or other), rather than express it, Butler argues that “there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (*Gender Trouble* 180).

may be similarly therapeutic for the spectator. This, as Bill Horrigan has argued, is often what documentaries about AIDS, made by people who are directly touched by HIV, aim to offer (171).

Dotan's story is told in a non-linear way: the spectator is not shown the history of Dotan's and Guttman's relationship, and questions such as where and when they met for the first time remain unanswered. The film comes across as an attempt to visualize Dotan's memories and inner thoughts about Guttman and her relationship with him. The past, the film suggests, needs to be created and re-imagined. Questions of authenticity and proximity to the "real", which were integral issues in discussions of biography, testimony and documentary-making for many years, lose in Dotan's view, their value. Instead, questions regarding the elusive quality of our memories, and of an objective "reality", are raised. As Andreas Huyssen claims: "[r]ather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation. The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory" (quoted by Sturken 9). Timothy Dow Adams has argued that autobiography

possesses a peculiar kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author's metaphors of self that attempt to reconcile the individual events of a lifetime by using a combination of memory and imagination – all performed in a unique act that partakes of a therapeutic fiction making, rooted in what really happened, and judged both by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation. (3)

In Dotan's film, the metaphoric and the realistic, memory and imagination, cannot be separated. The staging of subjectivity in the film exemplifies the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action", which Michael Renov borrows from Freud: "the manner by which experiences, impressions, or memory traces are altered after the fact as a function of new experiences and are thus rendered capable of reinvestment, producing new, even unexpected, effects of meaning" (*The Subject of Documentary* 114). Following Lacan's reading of this Freudian idea, Slavoj Žižek argues that "[p]sychoanalysis is [...] not concerned with the past 'as such', in its factual purity, but in the way past events are included in the present, synchronous field of meaning" (202). Dotan's filmmaking then follows

psychoanalysis in that it gives meaning, retroactively, to past events, a meaning that derives from their reorganization in a symbolic network (Žižek 202).

Last Post starts with Dotan's character entering Guttman's (Sean Karlin) flat for the first time and getting to know his close circle of friends, whose detachment from the society around them is emphasized by their child-like activities. One of them, for instance, is riding a toy horse in front of a TV screen. In her voice-over narration, the character of Dotan says that she was also considered a new "toy" in Guttman's surroundings that had to be explored and tried. Guttman's flat comes across as the Israeli version of Andy Warhol's Factory, an alternative space in which art and non-normative cultural practices and sexualities are encouraged. This scene, like the look and feel of the film as a whole, suggests that although it indeed comes to tell a story, it also serves a greater purpose, namely intensifying and reinforcing Guttman's myth. It also may attest to Dotan's difficulty in culling her own personal memories of Guttman from the way the media have remembered him. It stresses the power of the image, and of the performative act in the constitution of subjectivity. The scene raises questions regarding Guttman's "authentic" character. Was Guttman different from the characters he created on screen? Can one separate the one from the other? Guttman's "true" self and the "true" events that he and Dotan experienced go through a process of disintegration and fragmentation in the film.

Dotan opts to present her personal story – falling in love with the openly gay director – by distancing herself from it. It is told as a fictional story, using actors and scripted sequences, which are inspired by Guttman's films as well as serving as a homage to them. Dotan's memory of Guttman is fed by the cultural, public, memory of him and his work (as an "outlaw" filmmaker) as much as it feeds it. The opening sequence in the film shows Guttman's character walking down a busy street in Tel Aviv at night. At one point he goes past a couple of peepshow bars. The elements which are played out in this short sequence – a nocturnal stroll in downtown Tel Aviv amidst sleazy sex bars – seem as if they were taken from Guttman's *Bar 51* (1986) or *Amazing Grace* (1992). Another sequence takes place in a decadent bar, a leitmotif in almost all of Guttman's films. Dotan's character watches "Guttman" kiss another man and, feeling hurt, refuses to talk to him afterwards. Another sequence takes place in a battered car, and looks like a meticulous reconstruction of American road-movie aesthetics.

Not only in the narrative, but also in the images Dotan creates, the boundaries between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision, become blurred.

At one point in the film, Dotan's character tells in a voice-over about a dream she had, which is visualized in detail as she speaks. It shows her character entering a bright, white room, in which two men are having passionate sexual intercourse. Then she is having sex with one of the men, while another woman is taping them. While watching the tape, Dotan's character says in a voice-over, that she notices Guttman sitting on a tall chair, watching the action and laughing. The images that accompany the narrating voice create a dream-like, surreal sequence. Another surreal sequence, earlier in the film, shows the characters of Dotan and Guttman as husband and wife on their wedding day. The sequence is shot in washed-out colours, which code it as fantasy. In the voice-over she explains that Guttman, while under the influence of recreational drugs, suggested that they should get married. But when the effect of the drugs faded, it remained, mainly, her private fantasy.

These two surreal sequences allude to Guttman's early short films of the late 1970s in which the protagonists find refuge from their oppressive life in imaginary worlds. Dotan's use of surreal elements and a dream sequence can be seen as a tribute to a long tradition of gay filmmaking, embracing in particular the American experimental filmmakers of the 1960s such as Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol, who celebrated the non-logical and the irrational. Although mostly used in fiction films, elements of fantasy can also be found in films that have been considered, to a certain degree, documentaries. In his discussion of Jack Smith's 1963 avant-garde film *Flaming Creatures*, for instance, Marc Siegel comments on its contribution to the expansion of the term "documentary", especially in gay filmmaking. Siegel has argued that "[w]hile *Flaming Creatures* may have been 'impure,' too invested in cinematic fantasy to be accepted as a cinema vérité documentary, it also expressed a 'new kind of cinema truth,' one that saw in artifice, in performance the possibility for creating a more fabulous, more livable reality" (92).

Indeed, gay documentary filmmakers in the US and Europe in the post-Stonewall years did not aspire to produce a "realist" text. On the contrary, realism (mainly interactive realism, "the formulaic mix of interviews and archival footage joined by the mortar of observational vérité and musical interludes" [Waugh,

“Walking on Tippy Toes” 112]) was avoided at all costs. Instead, Thomas Waugh argues, lesbian and gay documentarists preferred “artificial and hyperbolic ‘performance’ discourses that pushed through and beyond the realist codes” (Waugh, “Walking on Tippy Toes” 112).⁷⁵

Similarly, Bill Nichols has argued that what is often also called performative documentary “suspends realist representation” and “puts the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension” (Nichols 96-97). Instead of an attempt to achieve a “window-like quality of addressing the historical world around us” (Nichols 94), performative documentaries present “a variable mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects as new dominants” (Nichols 94). In opposition to essentialist models of a stable gay sexuality and fixed gender categories, the non-realist approach has focused on gender and identity instability, and lack of transparency.

More than gay life in general, I believe, it is the specific challenge of representing AIDS and its effects on people who suffer from the illness and those who surround them that drives Dotan to revisit the experimental gay filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s to find new ways of storytelling. *Last Post* has much in common with works, mainly memoirs, which deal with AIDS as a major crisis in the contemporary era. The film attests to the problem of making a coherent narrative of and giving a meaning to a social event that seems to evade a cohesive meaning. AIDS and HIV have long been represented as postmodern conditions that do not respond to common tropes or cannot be contained by conventional practices of cultural memory, due partly to the fact that there is still no cure for the disease. As the epidemic has no narrative closure, it cannot be related as a past event, ready for inspection.⁷⁶

Distancing herself through reenactments from the story she tells, Dotan chooses, however, to finish her film with real footage of Guttman, shot shortly before he died of AIDS-related illness in 1993, in which she (this time, Dotan the

⁷⁵ It is important to note that while Waugh focuses mainly on the volatile boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, and realism and artifice in gay filmmaking, this blurring of genres and cinematic modes can also be found outside the gay or queer domain. In Israel, as in other places, “hybrid cinema” has also served filmmakers who explored their ethnic identity, sometime in conjunction with feminism, like Hanna Azulay Hasfari in her 1994 film *Shchur*.

⁷⁶ For a thorough discussion on representations and metaphors of AIDS, see Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*; Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*; and Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*.

filmmaker, and not the character) asks Guttman if he would like to say anything (Dotan is not fully seen on the screen but her voice is heard). Laconically, Guttman says “no”. The shift from fiction to non-fiction at the end of the film has different registers: there is a shift from a reenacted representation to real, documentary footage (which seems even more authentic due to the grainy and gritty quality of the camcorder picture: a grainy image has been long perceived as a signifier of authenticity),⁷⁷ from an actor to the real person; and from a healthy state (although the film is framed by Guttman’s illness, and it is mentioned several times, there are no tell-tale signs on the actor’s body) to a state of illness and then dying (thus, the film also serves as a *memento mori*). The beautiful Guttman, lively, full of desire, and fictitious, becomes in an instant a washed-out, grainy, laconic but real figure. These shifts signal the shattering of the protective, distanced fantasy Dotan has created, and bring her and the spectator to point zero: in the end, the “reality” (or at least our desire to grasp this “reality”) of life, and death, prevails.

***Almost There* (Sigal Yehuda and Joelle Alexis, 2004) and *Say Amen!* (David Deri, 2005): The Autobiographical Turn in Israeli Gay Cinema**

Like *Last Post*, the two films under this subheading, *Almost There* and *Say Amen!*, tell the story of their makers. Unlike Anat Dotan in *Last Post*, however, the filmmakers in this case do not use any distancing devices such as enactments or dramatization to tell their story. Rather, they position themselves in front of the camera and document in real time highly intensive, emotionally-charged phases in their lives. The filmmakers of *Almost There*, a lesbian couple, reexamine their lives and their relationships with their families in the process of looking for a new home away from Israel, in Greece. Meanwhile, the director of *Say Amen!* documents his coming out to his conservative family of Moroccan origin. The

⁷⁷ As Beverly Seckinger and Janet Jakobsen have argued, the low-quality image of the camcorder had become by the late 1980s a familiar means for signifying “realness”. It has become such an acknowledged signifier, that nowadays it is a widely used device on television commercials and reality TV shows, in which “the camcorder image contrasts with the slick look of big-budget television and betokens unproduced, raw reality” (150, 156n22).

diary-form that both films take (especially *Almost There*) situates the viewer in an intimate relationship with the subject of the autobiography.

In both films, the relationship between the filmmakers and their families is paramount. In *Say Amen!*, the filmmaker's coming out to his family is at the centre; in *Almost There* the inability of one of the filmmakers to come out to her parents prompts the couple to move to another country where they will not have to hide their sexuality and relationship. Interestingly, neither film has been shown in Israel despite their relative success on the international festival circuit. In the case of *Almost There*, Sigal Yehuda, one of the filmmakers, does not want to expose her family to the film.⁷⁸ The planned screening of *Say Amen!* in spring 2005 in Doc-Aviv, a documentary film festival held in the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, was cancelled after the family of the filmmaker demanded it. In July 2005 the family members threatened that they would go to the courts if the special screening of the film to members of the Israeli Film Academy were not cancelled (Pinto). The film, which adopts a home-movie format and includes family members without their consent, also raises some acute ethical issues.

As expected from self-authored films, these two documentaries serve to constitute a national, religious, and sexual identity for those who made them. They also offer an interesting insight into practices of exclusion and inclusion within the imagined Israeli gay community, whose awareness of the politics of otherness has not always been reflected in its practices. *Almost There* does this in relation to Israeli lesbians; *Say Amen!* in relation to non-Ashkenazi gay men. In their subjective, personal outlook on the families and cultures within which their protagonists/makers operate, the films, like all autobiographical documentaries, offer "a significant revision of an objective, externalizing, documentary practice" (Beattie 107).

Almost There

Almost There, released in 2004, is a filmed personal diary. Made by an Israeli lesbian filmmaker couple, Sigal Yehuda and Joelle Alexis, it is more than a mere

⁷⁸ Yehuda in a Q&A after a screening in the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, 2 Apr. 2004.

report of their attempt to find a new home away from Israel that will suit their needs. The filmmakers take a particular stance on contentious issues such as gender, sexuality and identity construction in general. The couple turn the camera upon themselves, using it as a tool for exploration of the self and for situating subjectivity within a broader social context.

Like *Last Post*, it seems as if the making of this documentary had a therapeutic aspect for the filmmakers: the couple's act of documentation during this period was not planned in advance. Rather, the idea for the film came only later, after the couple had settled into their new home (Aviva website). The scenes were culled from old tapes and then edited into a coherent cinematic text. Voice-over narration was added, in an attempt to create some inner logic and continuity to what was, intrinsically, a fragmented, home-movie-like project. In an interview given to the Aviva website, Sigal Yehuda said: "the idea [for the film] came [...] two years after we left Israel and settled down in Mykonos [...] we thought we should have a look at those tapes we filmed during our journey from Israel to Greece [...] we then immediately knew that this is the story we would like to tell. A story about dreams and the search for happiness, about a lesbian couple, struggling to find a spot in this world" (Aviva website).

The film, structured as a road-movie, shows the couple travelling from village to village. Their quest is to find a place that will remind them of their homeland, and, at the same time, will be very different. The house-hunting is a catalyst for other inner journeys. Questions regarding the couple's Israeli, Jewish and lesbian identities recur, and their relationship with their shared and separate past experiences, as well as their relationship with their families, is constantly examined. After a long period of searching, the couple seem to have found a place they both like. They settle on Mykonos, a Greek island known for its cosmopolitan and gay-friendly atmosphere.

In a voice-over, Alexis and Yehuda explain their different reasons for leaving. Alexis, who was born to a Jewish, Zionist family in Belgium, and had lived in Israel for 11 years, was frustrated by the escalating violence in the country. For Yehuda, who was born in Israel, the growing feeling of estrangement from her brothers and sisters, after coming out to them, and the fear of coming out to her parents, prompted her to seek a place where she could live her life freely. In a short Q&A session after one of the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

screening in April 2004, Yehuda explained that although three of her siblings (there are ten brothers and sisters in the family), know about the film, they are not interested in watching it. Their refusal to acknowledge Yehuda's lesbianism, a reaction that, although it did not lead to ostracism, is still painful, is also expressed in the film. In the voice-over Yehuda says:

I wish I could share our trip with my family, tell them about Joelle and that we intend to build our life together. But since I came out to my brother and sister I am closest to, we have become distant. My brother told me he'll always love me but can't share that part of my life with me [...] I thought that if they could see how happy I am it would make it easier for them, but it wasn't [...] I can't face the estrangement and prefer to make my life elsewhere. Maybe the distance will help us to get closer, and maybe when we find a home I'll even tell my other brothers and sisters.

The couple decides to look for a place in Greece because of its geographical and cultural proximity to Israel. Their departure, it seems, is not smooth: apart from the practical problem of deciding on a place, they both find it difficult to put their past behind them. The fact that Yehuda feels she has to keep her sexuality a secret from her parents, and Alexis's parents' lukewarm acceptance of their daughter's way of life play a major part in the couple's wish to start anew elsewhere, but also in their difficulty in doing so. Their happiness at finding a place in the world is mixed with sadness at not being able to share their life with others who are dear to them.

Yehuda's parents immigrated to Israel from Iran. They were of a lower-middle class, living at the economic and cultural margins of Israeli society. Reflecting upon her childhood, Yehuda remembers a dark home and poverty, but also a great sense of warmth and care. However, these strong feelings of love could not be challenged by Yehuda's non-normative sexuality. In order not to risk her status in the family, Yehuda preferred not to come out. In one of the scenes in the film, on Yehuda's return to Greece from her father's funeral, she is seen talking on the phone with her mother. As the conversation, full of expressions of love, is continuing, Alexis's voice is heard in the background, saying: "now and then I listen quietly to her talking to her mother. What can she talk about if she's hiding so much? And yet I can see she's emotional by the expression on her face. It seems they've found a place where words aren't important". Yehuda expresses,

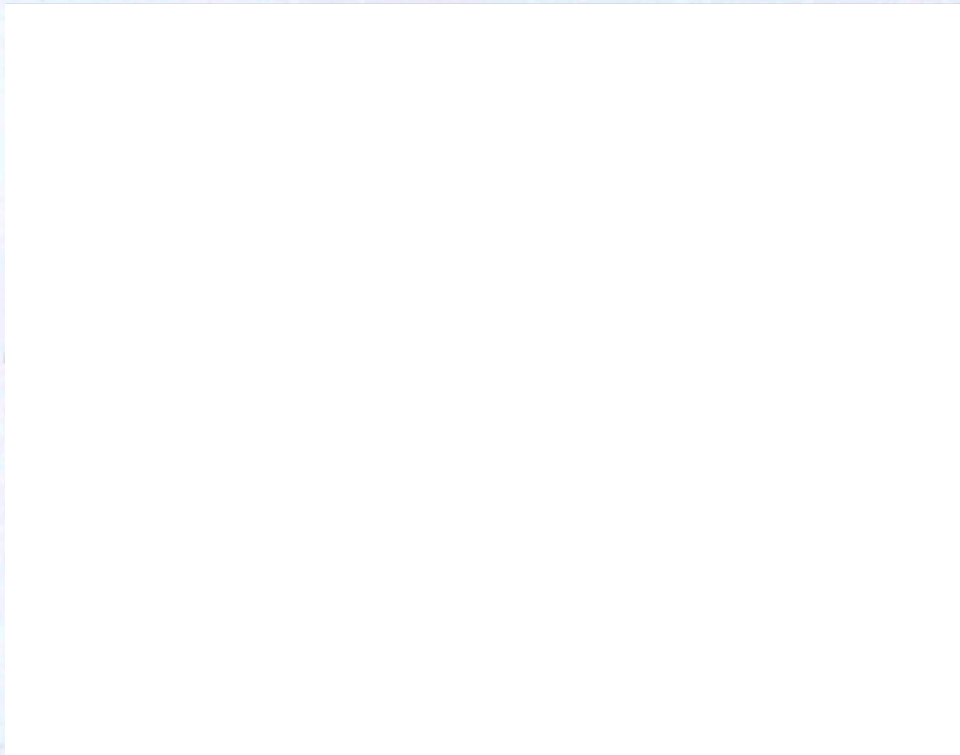


Fig. 5.1 Joelle Alexis (left) and Sigal Yehuda in *Almost There*. Courtesy of Sigal Yehuda.

in a voice-over, her wish to be fully accepted by her family: "I often have a fantasy where I see my brother and Joelle sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking as if it's the most natural thing. I'm afraid I'll lose the contact we had in the past and as years go by we'll become strangers".

In contrast to Yehuda's family, Alexis's family in Belgium comes across as wealthy and relatively liberal. However, Alexis's parents still find it difficult to fully accept their daughter's sexuality: although the parents welcome Alexis's girlfriend to their home (in the scene that opens the film), they ask the couple to sleep in separate bedrooms during their stay, and most of their attention is taken up by Alexis's sister's new baby. Later on, on a visit to Mykonos, Alexis's mother will spend a rainy day at home, revising her Hebrew classes. She tries to acquire the language, she explains, in order to be able to communicate with her Israeli son-in-law and her grandchildren. Alexis gets upset when her mother does not even mention her partner as a reason to learn the language.

The film does not offer a satisfying resolution at its end. While the couple seems to be content in their new home, it is clear that they are not ready to be reconciled with their previous life in Israel. The partial acceptance of Alexis's sexual identity by her family and Yehuda's constant hiding interfere with the idyllic life they seem to have created for themselves.

It is interesting to note that *Almost There* is probably the first film since Amos Guttman's feature films to link experiences of homosexuality in Israel with the notion of exile. Whereas most male gay films made after Guttman have emphasized gay men's integral part in the Israeli public sphere, the makers of *Almost There*, like most of Guttman's protagonists, express a wish to start anew elsewhere. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is that the filmmakers are lesbian. As one of very few films made by or about lesbians, *Almost There* is not just a powerful personal story: it is also an important document on the exclusion of the lesbian subgroup from the burgeoning gay community (or the idea of community) in Israel.⁷⁹

Although it is united in some ways, the differences in levels of visibility and acceptance of the different groups that constitute the imagined gay

⁷⁹ Another recent lesbian film is *Keep Not Silent (Et She'ahava Nafshi)*, 2004), a documentary by Ilil Alexander. The film portrays the lives of three Orthodox Jewish lesbian women, torn between their sexuality and their families and community.

community in Israel are still too large to ignore. The consistent exclusion of certain subgroups, such as Mizrahi and Israeli-Arab gay men, lesbians and transsexuals, as well as the complexity and sometimes contradictory nature of many of the male gay films produced in Israel (namely, their reliance on limiting fixed heteronormative categories of identity in representing male gay desire) challenge the notion of a homogenized collective.

Brought together in a political attempt to present a unified front, gay men, lesbians and transgenders have found themselves, in most parts of the western world, negotiating and accommodating some extremely different views, stemming from their different genders and backgrounds. The artificiality of this union and its downsides has been extensively discussed since the rise of the gay rights movement in the US in the late 1960s. Feminist writer Marilyn Frye, for instance, has said of this forced union: “the worlds of what the clinicians would call ‘homosexual’ women and men are very different [...] the male gay rights movement and gay male culture [...] are in many central points considerably more congruent than discrepant with [...] phallocracy, which in turn is so hostile to women and to the woman-loving to which lesbians are committed” (130). Similarly, Leo Bersani has stressed the difference of lesbian fantasies of desire from those of gay men: “[m]en loving men, women loving women: the separation between the sexes could hardly be more radical. Still, across that chasm, new kinds of bridges have been invented” (*Homos* 65). As I showed in my analysis of the film *Tel Aviv Stories* (*Sipurei Tel Aviv*, Ayelet Menachemi and Nirit Yaron, 1992) in Chapter 2, Israeli society might have overcome, to a certain extent, its homophobic sentiments, but it still discriminates against women. While patriarchal society can accept homosexuality it still finds it hard to accept strong heterosexual women, let alone strong homosexual women.

Israeli gay cinema’s almost exclusive emphasis on male narratives (gay men’s failed, or, in some cases, celebrated, masculinity, their relation to the concept of nationhood, and, most importantly, their status in the Israeli army) leaves little space, if any at all, for the creation of a fruitful discourse on lesbianism in Israel. In her discussion of the emergence of American queer cinema, which, like Israeli cinema, has abandoned lesbian concerns altogether, Amy Taubin has argued that “queer cinema is figured in terms of sexual desire and the desire it constructs is exclusively male [...] Indeed, women are even more

marginalised in 'queer' than in heterosexual film; at least in the latter they function as objects of desire" ("Beyond the Sons of Scorsese" 91). Tamsin Wilton goes further by claiming: "[e]very text other than the subversive few tells a tale by men, about men and for men. Heterosexuality is constructed around, and deployed (within economic, political, cultural, textual and sexual discourse and practice) to enforce, the subordination of women to men. Lesbians challenge this status quo in a way that gay men, I suggest, don't" (8).

Questions regarding lesbians' position within the relatively new queer and gay matrix have been part of the lesbian discourse ever since its inception. Wilton has stated that one of the lesbian movement's core aims is to fight the hegemony of the male narrative, be it heterosexual or homosexual. In that sense, it is not heterosexuality per se that presents a problem to the lesbian community but the prevalence of masculine codes in culture, a state of affairs for which gay men are as responsible as their straight counterparts. At the same time, the lesbian community's agenda differs also from that of heterosexual feminists. Wilton observes that while lesbians and gay men may not easily be incorporated into a generic (gender-resistant) queer, lesbians may also not be incorporated into the generic rubrics of "woman" or feminism.

Almost There attests to the problem of Israeli lesbian women in finding a locus from which they will be able to construct an identity of their own, and reexamine their relations with the dominant culture. Although it is only one example, the film itself and the fact that it was not shown in Israel emphasize the difference between the male gay experience and visibility in contemporary Israel and the lesbian one. Nonetheless, the film is a significant project as it makes the invisible visible, even if this visibility can only be seen and experienced away from Israel.

Say Amen!

In the 1997 TV series *Florentine*, director Eytan Fox devoted one of the early episodes to the coming out of Tomer, the gay protagonist, to his parents. This takes place at the time of the state funeral of the assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Tomer, a film student, decides to use this occasion as a cinematic

exercise and brings a camcorder to his parents' house in Jerusalem. He positions the camera on his parents' TV set while they are watching the funeral. He then tells them he is gay. As much as the news itself, it is the timing (a national mourning day) and the presence of the camera that upset Tomer's father.

Some years later, David Deri, a film director from Tel Aviv, followed the lead of *Florentine*'s fictional protagonist and started documenting his own family's reaction to the news that he is gay. As in *Florentine*, the parents' gradual realization of David's homosexuality is a highly dramatic event, but unlike *Florentine*, the process of coming out is long and distinctively complex: Deri is the youngest son of religious, conservative, Moroccan-born parents, who live in Yeruham, a poor development town in southern Israel. In this regard, the film bears a special importance in its exploration of Deri's gay identity vis-à-vis his ethnic and religious background.

For many years Deri has been avoiding his family's expectations that he will get married and have children. He is under increasing pressure to settle down. Two of his sisters who know about his sexuality (Deri's coming out to them took place before the time of the film), voice contradictory opinions regarding his planned confession. Whereas one warns him of the effect it will have on their parents and conservative brothers, the other says she cannot keep it a secret anymore from the others, who, sensing something is "wrong", are putting great pressure on her to tell. Deri himself, it seems, is torn between telling and not telling. While refusing to accept one sister's demand to keep silent ("you suggest I live a lie, you're even asking this of me", he says to her), he also keeps avoiding his brothers' direct question ("we're asking you a simple question", one of the brothers says at a family gathering, shown at the beginning of the film, "are you hiding something from us?"). But the collective family pressure on him for "good tidings", namely a wedding plan, prompts him, in the end, to come out to them.

In *Say Amen!* Deri situates himself in the familial order, witnessing "the difficulties of accommodation within rigid family structures to queer sensibilities and life choices" (Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* 180). The film is an attempt to close the split between Deri's two identities, the one influenced by his family and upbringing and the other shaped by his urban, gay life, and to create, in the process, the "imagined singularity" which is what we perceive as the self (Smith quoted by Beattie 105). Deri hopes to do this by getting his family's

acceptance of his “condition”. The constitution of subjectivity is the main goal in *Say Amen!*. The film traces the way identities are shaped and changed by interaction, in this case not only Deri’s identity but also the identities of the people who are directly affected by the realization that he is gay. One of Deri’s brothers makes this explicit when he finds out about him. He expresses a concern that if people knew his brother was gay they would see him too in a different light. Unlike *Florentine*, in which we are presented with a secular, affluent family whose liberal values lead to greater understanding, the dramatic nature of *Say Amen!* is a result of the immense gap separating the two worlds – the secular, progressive, gay-friendly world in Tel Aviv and the traditional world of Deri’s family. As one of the sisters tells Deri: “it’s not so great to be born gay to a family like yours”.

Whereas in *Almost There*, Yehuda, who, like Deri, comes from a poor Mizrahi-origin family, avoids any possible confrontation with her parents or siblings, Deri does not shy away from it. He seems to be aware of the dramatic potential of his “news”, and, perhaps deliberately, postpones the moment he tells his brothers. He carefully scripts the story of his coming out, intentionally prolonging the act in an attempt to create suspense.

The film omits any references to Deri’s social or romantic life. We do not see his social or professional circles in his adoptive city, Tel Aviv. At the heart of the film there is the family and the change of its dynamics around his act of coming out. For this reason, Deri does not seem to be the centre of the film, although he is the generator of this change. As the person who carries the camera he is present in every event documented in the film, but he is often an invisible participant. Being the cameraman (not the only one, of course, and we are introduced to the other crew members during the film) means that he is left outside the frame on many occasions. His voice is often heard, but his image is absent. When he is seen, he is often filmed from the back, or his figure is blurred or framed (Deri’s face is seen through mirrors several times in the film), suggesting a fragmented self. His absence from the cinematic frame conveys his passivity. His indecisiveness regarding his coming out means it is his siblings and parents who, by putting constant pressure on him, initiate and prompt it. Deri, thus, lets the others conduct the operation for him. By doing so, he places the



Fig. 5.2 David Deri in *Say Amen!* DVD capture, courtesy of David Deri.

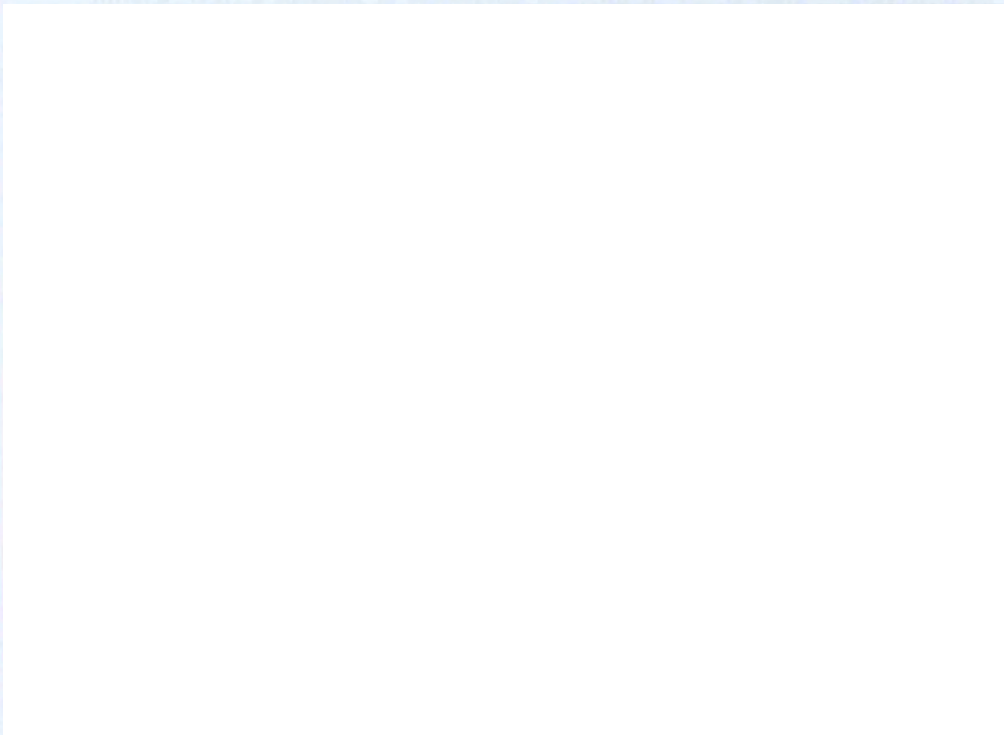


Fig. 5.3 Deri with his parents. DVD capture, courtesy of David Deri.

emphasis on their struggle to come to terms with the notion of homosexuality, which is so alien to them, rather than on his own struggle.

Deri is mainly seen with his family at his parents' house in Yeruham or at family gatherings. This enhances the sense of Deri's full engagement with his family. Unlike *Almost There* in which the family, especially Yehuda's, remains a relatively abstract institution, the constant presence of the Deris – siblings, brothers- and sisters-in-law, parents and grandparents – intensifies the drama. For Deri, it not only his homosexuality which needs to be accounted for, but also his profession, his secularism and the fact that he lives in Tel Aviv (“a stupid and stupefying city”, as one of the brothers tells him over a phone call). In *Say Amen!*, as in other gay documentaries which portray the relationship of the artist-subject with his/her family, sexuality and its sources is not the central subject matter of the work (Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* 181). Instead, the film records the way in which Deri's (gay) identity can resist his family's aversion to it without becoming lost altogether (as is the case, to a certain extent, in *Almost There*).

Indeed, Deri's identity is bound up with those of the others, despite their disapproval. The film portrays the conflicting emotions that come into play in both sides' attempt to reconcile. Deri's sister's declaration, early on in the film, that he (David) will never have their parents' support and sympathy in this, is challenged several times throughout the film. While resonating in the reaction of other relatives as well as the parents, we also witness a growing understanding on the other side. At one point in the film, Deri's mother, disappointed at her son's refusal to promise he will start praying in order to change, tells him she will disown him. In the next scene Deri is seen in his flat in Tel Aviv, talking on the phone with his mother, who empathically asks him if he has eaten. Another scene captures the feeling of warmth between David and his brother Itzik, despite the harsh things the latter says about homosexuality. Similarly, in a conversation between Deri and one of his sisters, she warns him of the strong reaction that their brothers may have to the news, but in the meeting they have later on, one of the brothers insists that he is more open-minded than they think. One of the last scenes in the film documents a surprise party that the family has organized for the parents. David is co-hosting the event. He later poses with his parents in front of the camera. The film ends with Deri asking his parents for their permission to take their picture, encouraging them to look at each other. They are shyly smiling at his

request. This scene, as well as the inscription at the end of the film (“to my parents with love”), signals some kind of reconciliation, though it is clear that the parents, and some of the siblings, are still incapable of accommodating the idea that their son and brother is homosexual.

Attempting to define a sub-genre of new autobiographical gay films, in which the often complex relationship of the artist-subject with his/her family is explored, Michael Renov has suggested that

[w]orks such as these mourn and memorialize loss, yet they testify with equal force to continuity, to the intransigence of subjectivity, a process charged and revived by contact with significant others in life and in memory. These works are perhaps the next generation of the new queer subjectivity on film and tape. Janus-faced, looking behind as well as ahead, personal yet embedded in the commonality of family life, these are works that bridge many gaps of human difference – those of generation, gender, and sexuality (*The Subject of Documentary* 180-81).

Pointing to the potential loss of family love and support, and attempting to create a new identity without cutting off links to the past, Deri, like Yehuda and Alexis in *Almost There*, bridges the “gaps of human difference” Renov refers to.

Like *Almost There*, *Say Amen!* exceeds its limited autobiographical scope and formulates a broader statement on Israeli society in general and the gay community in particular. The two films shed light on the acceptance of homosexuality in less liberal, affluent and established parts of Israel. The films challenge the “white”, male, middle-class hegemony of the Israeli gay community by exploring different kinds of gay life experiences. And although the hope for integration, both with the filmmakers’ families and with the mainstream gay community is not fully realized – in *Almost There* the protagonists leave Israel, and the future relationship between Deri and his family in *Say Amen!* (as well as his level of integration in gay circles in Tel Aviv) remains uncertain – these films are nevertheless another step towards a greater acceptance of diverse voices in the gay community.

Staging Sexual and National Identities: Performance and Performativity in *Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me* (Erez Laufer, 1996) and *It Kinda Scares Me* (Tomer Heymann, 2001)

In many ways both *It Kinda Scares Me* and *Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me*, conform to the general rules of a realist documentary: it is less interactive and contains more observational vérité. By focusing on performativity and its role in the constitution of gay and national identities, however, the films invite the spectator to question the alleged authoritative role of documentaries as representing “objective”, “true” realities, and ask whether these true realities exist in the first place. Dealing with questions of coming out, the films stress the performative aspect in the lives of most gay men and lesbians, and raise more general questions about socially fabricated identities. The different gay identities explored and presented in the films suggest there is more than one way in which one can respond to society’s expectations. Yet, both films show how gay identity, like any other, is also conditioned and governed by society.

Theories of documentary often emphasize the fictional elements to be found in the construction of the non-fiction story: “moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention”, as Michael Renov has argued (“Introduction” 2). Among these fictional elements, Renov includes the construction of a character, “emerging through recourse to ideal and imagined categories of hero or genius” (“Introduction” 2), the use of poetic language and narration, the use of music, the creation of suspense through editing. “With regard to the complex relations between fiction and documentary”, claims Renov, “it might be said that the two domains *inhabit* one another” (“Introduction” 3).

I would like to argue that while these points apply to all documentaries, gay documentaries tend to emphasize artistic intervention, the moments in which fiction and non-fiction meet. The making of reality on the screen resembles the making of identities in real life. The reality shown in a documentary film is constructed as much as the categories of “gay”, “straight” and others are. The exposure of the “seams” of documentary filmmaking (commonly perceived as “a window on an unscripted, undirected, unrehearsed, and unperformed reality” [Waugh, “Walking on Tippy Toes” 110]) implies the artificial, constructed nature

of reality itself. In a queer manner, it comes to oppose an essentialist approach to sexual and identity categories and, at the same time, the claim for objective cinematic observation.

Both films under this subheading are gay-themed documentaries, which foreground the fictional elements that underlie them and their subject matter. The notion of performativity, namely the construction of sexual identities, is stressed through the films' focus on performance: in *It Kinda Scares Me*, Tomer, the youth leader and the group of teenagers he instructs are putting on a play. In the process of writing and directing the play, Tomer will come out to the teenagers, and his homosexuality will be raised in the final version of the play; in *Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me*, a group of young Israeli actors, mostly gay, and their director, are bringing their theatrical show, based on gay monologues about love, coming out and matters of identity, to the Edinburgh Festival. While the actors talk freely about their fears and concerns regarding their profession and the international exposure they may receive at the festival, the spectator learns more about their life from their monologues (during rehearsals and in the festival).

It Kinda Scares Me

It Kinda Scares Me tells the story of Tomer Heymann, a young gay man from Tel Aviv who is appointed to work with a group of teenagers from Azur, a poor suburb of Tel Aviv, as part of a project called Youth Promotion. They are mainly high-school dropouts, some of them with criminal records. Heymann is sent to help them reform, an achievement, which may be symbolized, as the film suggests, in their enlisting in the army. The film starts with a short text appearing on the screen, explaining the principal goals of Youth Promotion: "(the project) is a national organization, the declared goal of which is to assist and support youths who are at risk, and to integrate them in normative and accepted frameworks in Israel, including enlistment to the IDF. These young boys and girls, who live on the fringes of society and whose future does not seem promising, drift easily and naturally to drugs, violence and crime. The Youth Promotion project supplies them with an alternative in the form of consistent and varied activities supervised by experienced professionals".

The film crew joins Heymann and the boys in their second or third year together. The spectators learn about the history of Heymann and the group through a series of short texts, appearing on the screen before the film begins. The spectators are informed that the first year ended in a crisis, with the boys stealing Heymann's motorbike and destroying it. This incident led to a long break, but eventually Heymann agreed to try again, and the meetings between him and the group resumed.

The film follows Heymann's and the group's attempts to put on a play, based on their real life stories. Heymann hopes to overcome the boys' resistance through a creative activity, namely the writing of and performing a play. Working on a play is a means to encourage them to open up to him, and by extension, to the audience in the Tel Aviv theatre where the show is eventually staged, and to the viewers of the film.

In the play the group and Heymann are encouraged to reveal their "true" selves, to let their fears go. The film documents the long process of building trust between the two parties and the frustrating work on the play. During that time, Heymann gradually becomes a more active participant in the lives of the teenagers. The film tries to convince us that by the end of it, Heymann is no longer a youth leader from a privileged background, but is also one of the boys.

The film builds toward a climax, timed roughly half way through the film, in which Heymann comes out to the boys. Heymann's homosexuality is hinted at beforehand: at one point he asks the boys what would be the most difficult thing for them to find out about him. This is presented as a teaser for both the boys and the viewer, who speculate what Heymann's secret may be. When he learns that one of the teenagers spotted him in a gay club in Tel Aviv, Heymann decides finally to come out to the group. His homosexuality and the complex feelings this new knowledge evokes in the members of the group will be expressed in the play. At the point of revelation there is a significant shift in the film: it no longer focuses primarily on the boys and their lives, but explores also Heymann's homosexuality and the way it can be perceived and understood outside his home in Tel Aviv. The sharp contrast between the two worlds is best portrayed when 18-year old Yacov, one of the dominant figures in the group, whom Heymann forms close ties with, arrives in the fashionable Tel Aviv café where Heymann works as a manager, to discuss the details of the play. Yacov, who up to this point

in the film is portrayed as a fearless, if sensitive, teenager (he calls himself “a reformed criminal”, who had been an experienced user of LSD and cannabis before he turned 17, and at one point in the film he appears at a hearing in a juvenile court), is too embarrassed to come in.

The revelation of Heymann’s homosexuality puts the group, at first, in a state of confusion and distress. It requires them to separate the preconceptions they have about gay men from the impression of the person they have known for several years. It also makes them question their own sexual preferences. While some of them are certain about their heterosexuality, others confess to having thought about having physical contact with other men, even if they have never intended actively to seek it. Although some homophobic remarks are made, some in a humorous, teasing way, and fears are raised that Heymann may be attracted to one of the boys, they gradually accept this new information and come to respect it. Heymann tries to uproot some of the preconceived ideas about homosexuality and gay sex. He mainly opposes the boys’ initial view of gay men as only interested in sex. He urges them to look at gay relationships in the same way they look at heterosexual relationships: like their heterosexual counterparts, gay men also seek love, courtship and respect, he insists. The success of the play (they perform in Tzavta, a famous institution in Tel Aviv, in front of a full house) signifies not only the acceptance of the teenagers by mostly Ashkenazi, educated Tel Aviv society, but also the acceptance of Heymann, the gay café manager from Tel Aviv, by the rougher edges of Israeli society.

Interestingly, the film, similarly to Eytan Fox’s, reverses the old order of things regarding the standing of homosexuality in society. Gay men, the film comes to show, are no longer excluded from positions of power, but can hold them equally. Heymann is portrayed as the representative of authority: he is hired by the state to work with youth on the fringes of society (formerly, the place of gay men) in order to bring them back to its centre. In the Israeli context, the center of society means enlistment to the army (another institution which discriminated against homosexuals for many years). The identification of Heymann with the state is further emphasized not only by the act of violence the boys carry out against him (stealing and destroying his motorbike) but also by Heymann’s support of the right of the mayor of Azur to deliver a speech at the end of the play in Tzavta. In their harsh reaction to this idea, the boys express their fierce

antagonism to any form of authority and the establishment. In this case they accuse the mayor of stealing the limelight and taking the credit away from them, since he had no real part in the work on the play. Heymann then urges them to reconsider. After all, it was the mayor who, by allocating money, made it possible for the group to perform in the prestigious Tel Aviv venue.

The fact that Heymann functions as a figure of authority in his work with the group, despite his homosexuality, can be seen as showing a progress in the way the members of the gay community are perceived in Israeli society. It is, however, important to note that Heymann's authority is exercised while working with a group of people who have been equally disenfranchised: the teenagers come from poor backgrounds and are mostly of Mizrahi origin. It is not very clear whether Heymann would have been granted the same power in a different context (among privileged, Ashkenazi, and straight people, for example). Also, it is not very clear whether Heymann would have been trusted in the same way had he performed a less-than-perfect masculinity, and made his homosexuality known right from the start. The boys are in a state of shock when they first find out about their leader's homosexuality, because it is indeed shocking: this is the last thing one would expect from the virile, straight-talking former paratrooper Heymann. As one of the boys says to the others in the film: "we always said Tomer looks like he gets to fuck loads of babes, and then you find out he's gay. It's weird".

This leads me to another aspect of the film, that of performance, performativity and visibility. As I claimed above, Heymann's straight acting was a cause for misunderstanding. It was also, I believe, what made it possible for him to lead the group in the first place. However, the issues of performance and performativity are not only linked to Heymann's homosexuality. Rather, they are used as an integral tool for Heymann and his group in their attempt to understand each other, and build trust.

Destroying Heymann's motorbike is an act of power on the part of the teenagers, a performative act against authority. Heymann's coming out to them is yet another act of performance, like any act of coming out, but even more so here, as Heymann uses it to expose his own weakness. By coming out to the group, Heymann comes across as vulnerable and different, which is how the teenagers see themselves. His newly acquired "vulnerability" places Heymann and the boys together at the margins of society. It also proves to them that although they came

from an underprivileged position they can overcome the obstacles and succeed, as Heymann did. Thus, Heymann's coming out does not necessarily seem an "authentic", brave step in the nascent relationship between him and the boys, but a planned performative act, which comes to serve both his work with the group and the dramatic pace of the film. After the expected expressions of confusion, the teenagers gradually overcome their aversion to this kind of difference, and join Heymann in the Pride Parade in Tel Aviv, yet another grandiose act of artificial and excessive performance (the drag queens, shirtless muscle men, etc.), which is meant to serve entertainment and political ends (as visibility has long been connected with concepts of power). The continuous presence of an audience – Heymann's is the teenagers' audience, and they are his, the audience in Tzavta is watching the play in which the group and Heymann reveal some of their most intimate secrets, and the constant presence of the camera, of which the group and Heymann are always aware – means that all their behaviour is essentially performative. Yakov tells Heymann that putting on the play would prove they are not just "a group of hooligans", as they might seem to others. In another scene, dancer Sharon Eyal urges the group to express their emotions using their bodies. When some remain frozen, embarrassed about how they may look to others, she says: "why do you care what others may think of you? You should do what makes you feel good". The emphasis placed on performance, and the importance both Heymann and the group give to matters of representation can be seen as a technique to deal with the invisibility that has been imposed for years on both the teenagers (as representatives of other, non-Ashkenazi, underprivileged Israel) and Heymann (as a gay man). While both parties, Heymann and the boys, share the same historic, internalized feeling of exclusion, Heymann stands now as living proof that such a shift of status – from invisibility to visibility, from exclusion to acceptance – is indeed possible. Through performances and rituals (the military service, for example) the boys, like Heymann before them, will be let into the heart of Israeli society.

Heymann's coming out serves both him and his film: it dispels, to a certain degree, the ethnographic feel the film may otherwise have produced (a young filmmaker from the centre who travels to the periphery to document the lives of people on the fringes of society, aspiring to make them transparent to others). Despite being quite a conservative text, close in spirit to Eytan Fox's films, which

have celebrated the success story of gay integration in Israel without taking into account the sacrifices made for it (the adjustment to heteronormative institutions and ways of thinking and the exclusion of other forms of otherness in the gay community), Heymann's film blurs the hierarchic divisions between him and the teenagers he tutors. His decision as a filmmaker to include in the final version of the film several sequences in which the members of the group urge him to open up to them, and share his secrets, comes to show his equal standing in the film. He also takes part in the confessional project, which the play and the film are about. He is not there just to document. At one point in the film, one of the boys tells Heymann: "you are not our therapist. There is no reason why we should tell you our secrets, but you won't tell us yours". Heymann aims to make the spectator believe that not only is he not the boys' therapist; he is also not an ethnographic documentary filmmaker. By placing his own life on the same level as the boys', by writing his own experience into their play and into the script of the film, Heymann, manipulatively or not, practices a new, allegedly non-ethnographic, performative, documentary making.

Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me

Edinburgh Doesn't Wait for Me, Erez Laufer's film of 1996, is, like *It Kinda Scares Me*, mainly a film about the connection between homosexuality and the performative aspects of identity construction, gay identity in particular. The film is divided into two parts. The first half documents the six weeks of rehearsals in Tel Aviv of *Words of His Own*, a play based on short sketches portraying gay male experiences in 1990s Israel. In the second half, the film follows the arrival of cast and crew at the Edinburgh Festival, and their performances during it. The director focuses mainly on the struggles the group encounters in Edinburgh. The play did not prove to be the immediate commercial success everyone expected. The film does end, however, with a happy resolution, in the form of a series of sell-out performances. In the background, the dynamics between the actors (two of them are gay, one is straight), the gay director and text editor, and the rest of the production crew, are unfolded on the screen. Gradually, the reality of the play and that of "real" life merge, and it becomes increasingly difficult to tell whether

the actors and crew express authentic feelings of stress and joy or merely play their part to the camera. Curiously, in an interview about the making of the film, Laufer said that he could not use the material he shot in the very first days because of the actors' "non-natural" performances (Zimmerman, "Chadira El Toch Merchav Prati").

This confusion is not only because the documentary's stars are actors. The performative mode, which dominates the film, on and off the stage, I argue, eventually comes to play with, and sometimes resist, the cultural meanings given to constructed sexual categories. Both the gay actors and director, and the sole heterosexual actor, respond to what is expected from them. The gay group comes across as flirtatious (one of the two gay actors, Hagai Ayad, is sharing a bed with the straight actor, Tzachi Grad, and the alleged sexual tension between them, at least on the part of Ayad, is extensively discussed; humorously, Ayad "makes a move", but is gently refused) and promiscuous (the director, Noam Meiri, is having a brief sexual encounter with a local man in Edinburgh, whom he calls sarcastically "my new boyfriend"). It is little wonder that Itzik Cohen, the other gay actor, compares gay relationships to fast food. Talking about the immediacy and speed of communication between gay men, his use of this term also raises associations of cheapness and unhealthiness.

Tzachi Grad, on the other hand, plays the role of the heterosexual Israeli "macho". The fact that he is open enough to take on a gay role in the play is understood as part of his "bohemian", artistic persona, and of his dedication to his vocation. The fact that he is the only straight man in this tight-knit group is emphasized right from the start, when Meiri is coaching him on one of his monologues: "unlike us, you are required to do pure acting. If I were on stage, I would have opened a small window into my life and it would be there on stage, just like that. But it is different for you". At the same time, the filmmaker keeps hinting at Grad's potential, dormant homosexuality. Although his heterosexuality is repeatedly mentioned, it is never practiced. Unlike Ayad and Meiri, who are seen kissing and socializing with local men, Grad does not respond to his heterosexual call when a young woman shows an elaborate, unequivocal interest in him (he does, however, talk at length about how gay men take a sexual interest in him time and again). His heterosexuality remains theoretical, suspended, waiting to be proven, just like his potential homosexuality (Grad says toward the

end of the film, when asked once again about the possibility that he would ever consider experiencing gay sex, that “theoretically” he would have considered this, but, in practice, he simply cannot). The lack of conclusive evidence regarding Grad’s heterosexuality, apart from the discursive, rhetorical and performative means which he and the others employ, intensifies the enigma surrounding him and his motivation to take part in such a show (a play, as we learn later on, in which he has also invested his own money), and adds to the tension which is built up in the film. Moreover, it reflects the belief, common in gay and queer thought, that there is a potential of same-sex attraction in any human being.

The film links different forms of marginality: sexual, national and religious. The experience of sexual otherness the performers and crew feel is amplified by their national and religious marginality in Edinburgh. The narrative of the film makes extensive use of some tropes common in earlier fiction Israeli films (and in Israeli culture in general). The script portrays the production team’s sincere attempts to win people’s hearts in Edinburgh as a battle of few against many, which is eventually won, almost against all odds. When they find out they have been evicted from the second venue, because the owner of the place “did not want any more gay men in there”, Meiri says: “we’ve been surviving for 4,000 years, so why should we give up now to some gentile?” Cohen shares Meiri’s determination in saying: “if there’s an audience and a torch, I will perform”. Earlier on, after facing yet another defeat, one team member compares their situation to that of the biblical figure Job. And throughout the film, the cast and crew express their wish to “conquer” Edinburgh. The etymological root of the verb to conquer in Hebrew (*li’chbosh*) recurs in Zionist terminology, in phrases such as *Kibush Ha’avoda* (the conquest of labour) and *Kibush Ha’shmama* (the conquest of wilderness).

Ticket sales in the first week or so are very poor, and there are some technical problems at the first venue. At one point it seems as if the production is in danger. However, the initial disappointment gradually vanishes as the play becomes a great success. In the process, the film shows the crew coming up with inventive ideas of how to market the play (among other things, the actors engage in drag shows on the streets of Edinburgh, and exhort people to come and see “the holy gays”). The film ends with a triumphant series of shows, which conform to

the formulaic narrative ending of the heroic-nationalist genre films: in the end, the good and the just always win.

In its portrayal of a group of jovial actors, the film offers a comic, uplifting depiction of gay existence, in which gay men are presented as either sexually obsessed or ultra feminine. Cohen, who was at the time a member of the popular drag act *B'not Pesya*, is shown in drag several times in the film. Ayad is shown in drag once. At one point in the film, Cohen is seen putting on make up, while one of the female members of the production team is saying to the camera: "how can I possibly compete with such a perfect femininity?"

The director's use of ready-made formulas, both in his representation of gay men and in the way he decided to construct the narrative (telling a victory story of how Edinburgh was finally conquered by only a few "holy gay men") has a special significance apart from the filmmaker's wish to create an accessible, commercial film. At one level, the film conforms to patterns of thinking prevalent both in the gay community and in Israeli society. Thus, gay men are designated as different from the norm by the emphasis on their uncontrolled femininity. As Israelis, who represent their country at a prestigious international festival, their story follows the well-trodden plot, as victimization is replaced by a sweeping, almost miraculous, victory. The spectator is led, with the actors, from a state of despair to the heights of triumph.

However, albeit unintentionally, the film offers some insight into the operation of imagining, creating and performing subjectivities. It stresses the *unnatural* process of becoming, whether it is becoming a gay man (often literally, as the act of drag shows), or indeed, Israeli. In both cases, the work of myths and symbols cannot be easily dismissed.

***Positive Story* (Ran Kotzer, 1996) and *Yakantalisa* (Yair Lev, 1996): Living with and Dying of AIDS in 1990s Israel**

Yakantalisa and *Positive Story* were produced in 1996. They were first screened at the Jerusalem International Film Festival of that year, and were both nominated for best documentary film. The films deal with the AIDS epidemic and do so through the life-stories of two individuals. *Yakantalisa* was made for the state

television channel, but its planned transmission was cancelled. Kotzer tried to interest various broadcasting bodies in Israel in *Positive Story* but was rejected. Eventually, the film was produced as a graduation project for Tel Aviv University where Kotzer studied.

The similarities between the films, however, end there. *Yakantalisa* tells the story of a victim of the AIDS epidemic, the poet, choreographer, visual artist and journalist Hezi Leskly, who died of AIDS-related-illness in May 1994 at the age of 42. The protagonist of *Positive Story*, Avinof Frumer, on the other hand, is a person with HIV, who hopes the disease will not catch up with him: “No one’s proven that it’s inevitable that eventually I’ll develop AIDS. I believe I will get sick, but I’m constantly trying to convince myself that perhaps I won’t. Seven years is a long time and it can extend to ten and even fifteen or twenty years”. Frumer is in almost every frame of the film, a presence that comes to emphasize his vitality, his choice in life. *Yakantalisa*, by contrast, while it centers on the character of Leskly, hardly features him. Only once, towards the end of the film, is he seen, as a young artist reading one of his poems at a poetry evening in Tel Aviv in 1974. The quality of the clip, found in the archives of the state television channel, is poor, with a blurred image and soundtrack. It is hard to see Leskly or to listen to him reading. These indecipherable images and sounds, however, reflect the enigmatic character of Leskly well. The story of his life is told by the people who knew him, through the places where he lived, studied and created, and through his poems. Lev has argued that this was an intentional decision he took while making the film: “I wanted to make a film in which I wouldn’t create on the screen a character of a person who no longer exists. On the contrary, I wanted to deal with the absence of this person, with the fact that he no longer exists [...] I turned his absence into a presence through the things that he left behind – words, lyrics and friends” (Lev Ari, 44-45). This absence is illustrated well in one of the very last shots in the film, in which the camera roams the empty rooms and corridor in Leskly’s flat in Tel Aviv, creating an eerie feeling of void.

Yakantalisa is epic both in terms of its subject, a prominent figure in the media and cultural scenes in 1980s Tel Aviv, and in its production values. The film’s running time is 79 minutes, and it was shot in different locations in Israel and the Netherlands. *Positive Story*, on the other hand, is told by Frumer, and is constructed as an interview. Its running time is half of *Yakatalisa*’s (42 minutes),

and it looks like televised reportage.⁸⁰ Despite these differences, the films work together as a testament to a growing tolerance towards and interest in the disease and the people who suffer from it, whether they are well-known cultural figures such as Leskly (or Amos Guttman, whose autobiographical feature film *Amazing Grace* came out in 1992) or ordinary people like Frumer.

The protagonist of *Positive Story* takes the filmmaker, and the spectator, through the different chapters of his life story – the realization of his difference at school, coming out, first sexual encounters, the day he found out he was HIV-positive, coping with this new knowledge, and the attempt to keep living. The film follows Frumer's routine check-ups in hospital, his shows as a drag queen, a demonstration against the indifference of the government to people with HIV-AIDS, and his workplace. It also includes still pictures of Frumer's former boyfriend, Richard, whom he met at an international conference for people living with HIV-AIDS in London in September 1991, and who eventually died of the disease. The film can be read as an educational tool in the fight against the disease and stigmatization. If *Yakantalisa* glorifies its subject – Leskly – and emphasizes his extraordinary qualities as a person and as an artist (“as part of the efforts of the community in Tel Aviv to create for itself a pantheon of mythological heroes”, as was pointed out by the critic Amnon Lord in *Tel Aviv Magazine*), *Positive Story* needs to portray Frumer as a person that every young Israeli, or at least, every young gay Israeli, can identify with.

When he is filmed in the stationery shop where he works, Frumer insists his life is not as dull as it may seem. However, it is precisely this “dullness” that the filmmaker celebrates in order to get his message across. At one point in the film, Kotzer asks Frumer if he and his friends ever talked about the disease when he came out as gay. Frumer says the subject was discussed in the sex education programme in high school, and that he wishes he had internalized it: “like everyone else, I thought it won't happen to me. And it did”. The film brings the story of someone who is “like everyone else”, whose medical condition has

⁸⁰ Kotzer made other films in a similar fashion: *Gay Games* (*Mis'hakim Alizim*, 1999) follows the Israeli team to the Gay Olympics in Amsterdam in 1998; *Amos Guttman: Film Director* (*Amos Guttman: Bi'mai Kolnoa*, 1997) on the late filmmaker (see also Chapter 3); and *Death Cause: Homophobia* (*Sibat Ha'Retzach: Homophobia*, 2003) deals with the increasing number of murders of closeted older homosexual men by younger hustlers with whom they had established steady relationships.

disrupted his plans, which were like everyone else's: completing the military service, going to university, falling in love.

Yakantalisa was made two years after the death of Leskly. The film goes to the places where he lived and which inspired him: Givatayim, a small town near Tel Aviv where he grew up, The Hague and Amsterdam, where he lived in his early 20s, and Tel Aviv, where he made a name for himself in the 1980s. The singularity of his life and art is the focal point of *Yakantalisa*. At one point in the film the Israeli artist Maya Gordon, one of Leskly's closest friends, tells Lev about her first encounter with Leskly in Amsterdam: "he looked unreal, a creature". Whereas *Positive Story* points to the effort of its protagonist to lead a "normal" life under very harsh conditions, *Yakantalisa* creates a myth, a larger-than-life existence. It weaves the story of Leskly's illness into his life, which was, even before he was diagnosed with the disease, characterized by breaking conventions (unlike Frumer in *Positive Story*, Leskly was not recruited to the army after declaring he was a homosexual) and a strong impulse for self-destruction. This, it is suggested in the film, is a result of Leskly's tragic circumstances: he was born to Holocaust survivors after eight failed pregnancies (his mother gave birth to four stillborn babies). His father, who lost his first wife and a child in the Holocaust, yearned for a boy. Being a homosexual, Leskly could not possibly live up to his father's expectations. His mother, too, preferred to pretend that she did not know he was gay and that he had AIDS. She refused to help Lev with the making of the film after she found out that her son's homosexuality and the cause of his death would be discussed. According to Rivka Bin-Noun, Leskly's cousin and an interviewee in the film, Leskly's mother wished to believe in Leskly's respectable façade, to believe he was someone he was clearly not. According to Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz, a close friend and another interviewee in the film, "Leskly's mother was one of the last to realize what a great man her son was".

Leskly is presented by the friends who talk about him in the film as an Israeli version of Jean Genet, a suffering artist of the gutters, who, while living in Amsterdam, used to go to S&M clubs and saunas, in search of casual sex as well as out of intellectual interest in this underground world. The scholar and literary critic Ariel Hirschfeld comments in the film that for Leskly "homosexuality was a journey into a certain kind of knowledge, a particular underworld he was

designated for". For Leskly, so he claimed in his writing, which is quoted in the film, S&M was an extension of the language of sex, and he was interested in the extension of languages.

Each film takes a different approach, conceptually and visually, to frame the disease and its victims. Whereas *Positive Story* tells the story of an ordinary person, whose "dullness" is celebrated as an expression of resistance, *Yakantalisa* aspires to create a mythical, enigmatic story about a mythical, enigmatic character. The absence of any footage of Leskly, except for the blurred clip at the end, leaves the task of portraying him to his friends and the places he inhabited. Frequenting S&M clubs (described by Gordon as "hell in intermission") and expressing his thoughts in a complex poetic language, or through dance, Leskly is portrayed as an extraordinary character. His premature death from a fatal disease is seen as almost predetermined fate.

It is no coincidence, however, that the two films came out in the same year, not long after the death of Amos Guttman from the disease. It seems as if this was the time when the Israeli media could finally start dealing with AIDS and its aftermath. The films signal a turning point in the way the illness was thought of in Israeli discourse – from a token of the dark S&M clubs of Amsterdam to the vital presence of Frumer, whose strongest wish is to integrate into Israeli mainstream culture. Although the two individuals, Frumer and Leskly, are gay, and therefore AIDS is still portrayed as a "gay disease",⁸¹ they represent different modes of existence with and in relation to the disease.

***Family Matters* (David Noy and Yoram Ivry, 2004): Alternative Parenthood and the Demise of the Gay Partnership**

Rather than dealing with the construction of a gay identity, the documentary film *Family Matters* focuses on the process of its dissolution when it tries to merge with a heterosexual domain. The film follows a gay couple, Kai, a German air steward and Itamar, an Israeli lawyer, who wish to have a child together. They meet Daphna, a single, heterosexual Israeli woman, a professional flautist,

⁸¹ It is mainly with the death of international pop star Ofra Haza of the disease in 2000 that the discourse around AIDS in Israel has expanded further, to include also heterosexual victims.

through a forum of “alternative parenting” in Israel. Agreeing that Itamar will be the biological father, he then forms a close tie with Daphna. At first it seems that the three of them will indeed be able not only to achieve their personal goal to become parents but also to create an “alternative” form of a nuclear family, with two gay fathers and a mother. But soon after they meet, the relationship between Kai and Daphna sours: they both feel abandoned by Itamar. Daphna feels left out when Itamar goes back to Kai (who later becomes his husband, as they marry in Germany), and Kai feels excluded because he is not part of the genetic creation that connects Itamar and Daphna.

The film begins with a shot of Kai strolling in the narrow streets of the Old City in Jerusalem. His partner is at the Tel Aviv hospital where Daphna is giving birth. He hears the news of the birth over the phone, and he and Itamar both cry. The film then cuts to 18 months previously, to the point where Daphna, Itamar and Kai are just starting to get to know each other, and are still devising an ideal future together. Initially Daphna describes Kai as an equal partner, and the fact that Itamar is the biological father seems to have no special significance.⁸²

Yet, as Daphna’s pregnancy progresses, she and Itamar form a unique relationship of their own, which feels, as Itamar calls it, like a betrayal. It becomes clear that Kai has no place in the process. At an early ultrasound check-up, Kai is still present in the room with Daphna and Itamar, but he is no longer a fully equal partner: while he holds Itamar’s arm, the camera moves slowly towards Itamar, who holds Daphna’s leg with his other hand. This subtle detail indicates the power structure between the three. At this point, Kai still believes he will be with Daphna and Itamar at the hospital when Daphna gives birth, but her facial expression betrays her disapproval. Daphna’s feelings are elaborated in a later scene, in which she shares her concerns with her girlfriends.

In order to secure their relationship in face of the new threat, Kai and Itamar decide to marry in Germany. Ironically, the marriage functions as a reaction of a heteronormative kind to a threat which is also part of the heteronormative order (having a child, forming a nuclear family). Although the

⁸² Itamar’s and Kai’s earlier attempt to have a child is revealed at a visit to the grave of a close friend of theirs in an early scene. This attempt ended in a miscarriage that led, according to Itamar, to their friend’s death. In this case, Kai was the prospective biological father of the gay couple’s child, a fact that suggests that initially no significance was attached to who would donate the sperm.

decision to get married may well be a mutual wish, it is shown in the film as mostly Kai's initiative. It is he, for instance, who insists on a big celebration, while Itamar says he would prefer a small, intimate ceremony. When asked about their upcoming wedding, Daphna shows an ostentatious lack of interest, and refuses to be there. The wedding, she claims, is Kai's way of displaying his legitimate claim on Itamar.

Kai's exclusion is expressed not only through Daphna's disapproval of him, but also through his foreignness, symbolized by his heavily accented Hebrew. At one point in the film he says: "In Germany I am the Israeli, and here I am the German". His somewhat rootless existence is further emphasized by his vocation – he works for a German airline, which puts him in a constant transitory state. The fact that gay partnerships are not as widely accepted in Israel as in his native land adds to his feeling of rejection. When Kai arrives at the hospital, he and Itamar approach the desk and ask for special permission to let them both see the baby, Tal. "I am the biological father, and this is my husband, the non-biological father", Itamar explains to the woman behind the desk. When they finally get to the room, Kai films the baby with his camcorder, but is then interrupted by another employee, who enters the room and asks if they have obtained the required permission to visit. At this point Kai loses his temper. This sequence displays a tension between a liberal, progressive model of relationships and sexuality (even if this model follows the heteronormative order) and a rigid, slightly homophobic reaction to it. It is a pivotal moment, which indicates the heavy price required from those who wish to experience alternative parenthood.

After the birth, the situation between the three deteriorates further, to the point where Daphna refuses to send Tal to Itamar's and Kai's place, claiming that Kai's jealousy makes him hostile toward her. This decision is interpreted by Itamar, in turn, as a hostile act, and he then threatens recourse to the courts if things do not change. After negotiations, conducted by a third party, they manage to reach a settlement, and the film closes with Tal's first birthday party. It is a happy ending of a sort, even though it has a bitter undertone. As Daphna says: "we started out hoping to create a different form of family, but that didn't happen. What we have instead is two families: me and Tal, and Itamar and Kai with Tal. I'm OK with it. It is also a kind of peace".

Interestingly, the subsequent break-up of Kai and Itamar's 11-year relationship is not mentioned, as if not to interrupt the happy family narrative. The story of their eventual break-up was discussed extensively in an article about the film, published before the film was first broadcast on TV. In the article, Kai, who had returned to Germany, said: "unfortunately, human genetics won" (A. Peled 56).

The decision to open the film with a sequence highlighting the break-down of the gay relationship does not leave much room for hope. Alternating the pictures of birth at the hospital with Kai walking by himself in Jerusalem, the opening sets gay relationships and parenthood at two opposite poles. Starting the film with a sort of ending, the story of the protagonists unfolds without many surprises. Parenthood remains a privilege of the heteronormative order.

The film touches on a principal tension within the gay world, between the desire to adjust to heteronormative models and the queer call to defy those structures and develop instead an alternative mode of existence. This tension has been at the core of gay and queer discourses from the start. With every progress gay communities in the Western world make towards an equal standing in their societies (through achieving rights to serve in the army, to form civil partnerships, to adopt children etc.), more voices emerge criticizing the gay community's subordination to oppressive heteronormative practices.

One such voice is Lee Edelman's: connecting the figure of the child in Western culture with the heteronormative sacred, and, in his eyes, fictional, idea of a future (which "always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity" [*No Future* 25]), Edelman expresses hopes for a queer alternative. This alternative will undo the social formation that the heteronormative order imposes on us and will point out the gap that the dominant culture, caught in the Symbolic order, has already foreclosed for us in the very act of giving meaning and names, and of looking forward to "tomorrow". In the words of Edelman:

by figuring a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity, while refusing as well any backdoor hope for dialectical access to meaning, the queer dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests: a faith in the consistent reality of the social – and by extension, of the social subject; a faith that politics, whether of the left or of the right,

implicitly affirms [...] queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them. (*No Future* 6-7)

Edelman acknowledges that queers (by which he means “all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates” [*No Future* 17]) are also “psychically invested in preserving the familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism” (*No Future* 17). However, queerness has the power to move us beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law, to a site which cannot be named or grasped, while, in the process, continuously undoing social reality, which relies on imaginary identifications, on the structures of the Symbolic law and on the paternal metaphor of the name. In this site, *jouissance*, loosely translated as “enjoyment”, rather than futurism, is the key principle.

By driving us toward the notion of *jouissance*, Edelman claims that queer culture has the potential to oppose this fundamental expectation for “tomorrow” embodied in the figure of the child. He writes:

while lesbians and gay men by the thousands work for the right to marry, to serve in the military, to adopt and raise children of their own, the political right, refusing to acknowledge these comrades in reproductive futurism, counters their efforts by inviting us to kneel at the shrine of the sacred Child: the Child who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior; the Child who might find information about dangerous ‘lifestyles’ on the Internet; the Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public library; the Child, in short, who might find an enjoyment that would nullify the figural value, itself imposed by adult desire, of the Child as unmarked by the adult’s adulterating implication in desire itself; the Child, that is, made to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an Imaginary fullness that’s considered to want, and therefore want for, nothing. (*No Future* 19-21)

Edelman attacks the desire of gay men and women to perpetuate the illusionary heteronormative fantasy of tomorrow, embedded, in part, in the desire to rear children. He expresses disappointment, if not anger, at the gay community’s failure to form an alternative to the heteronormative social order through emphasis on *jouissance*. *Family Matters*, on the other hand, represents the attempt to accommodate gay desire within the heteronormative domain. However, it is the ultimate failure of this attempt that the film ends with.

Family Matters is meant to be a bittersweet tale of the joy and sorrow of bringing a child into the world. The failure to establish an alternative family is mixed with the joy of having the baby after all (as Daphna says at Tal's first birthday party, speaking also on behalf of Itamar: "It is a great privilege to be parents, but even more so, it is a great privilege to be Tal's parents"). According to Edleman's view of queerness and its power to challenge the heteronormative order, however, the failure of the gay partners in the film is precisely in their wish to have a child in the first place, and what that wish really stands for, namely the perpetuation of the existing oppressive social order in the name of its futile hope for "tomorrow".

***Zero Degrees of Separation* (Elle Flanders, Canada, 2005) and *Gan* (Ruthie Shatz and Adi Barash, 2003): Gay Identities and Practices and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

A recent development in gay discourse in Israel is its engagement with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although the subject was already touched upon in Amos Guttman's *Drifting* (Nagua, 1983), and explored in some depth in films such as *Hamsin* (Daniel Wachsmann, 1982) and *Hide and Seek* (Machboim, Dani Wolman, 1981), Israeli gay films were mostly exclusive in their portrayal of a closed, homogenized Jewish (mostly Ashkenazi) gay society. The two documentaries discussed in this section explore homosexual identities and practices (the protagonists of *Gan* do not consider themselves gay although they have sex with other men) as they are formed and experienced by Palestinians and Arab-Israelis. Although important, sexuality is merely another factor in the life of the protagonists who face constant threats of deportation and racial discrimination.

Zero Degrees of Separation

Zero Degrees of Separation is a unique attempt to link gay activism in Israel with the leftist struggle to end the occupation. The film, directed by Israeli-Canadian

filmmaker Elle Flanders brackets together the plight of Palestinians and the struggles that gay men and lesbians face in Israel. Through the stories of two interracial gay couples the film touches upon issues of gay sexualities and relationships, the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and inner tensions within Israeli society itself.

Surprisingly, it is not the couples' homosexuality that is the central focus of the film. Instead, it emphasizes the daily difficulties they have to endure because of their more acute difference, their ethnic/racial one. One of the most striking points the film makes is the matter-of-fact attitude towards gay identity in Israel, compared with the attitude of suspicion and hostility that still awaits Jewish-Arab couples, whether they are gay or straight. The film serves more as a critique of the consequences of a long, aggressive occupation and the chasm between Zionist ideology and the crumbling reality more than fifty years after the establishment of the state of Israel and the Palestinian *Nakba* ("catastrophe"). This chasm is effectively portrayed through Flanders' frequent use of her grandparents' home movies, which triggered the making of the film. In a series of short texts, which appear on the screen at the beginning of the film, Flanders informs the viewers that this film-archive documents her grandparents' involvement in the establishment of the State of Israel. Her grandfather was active in Britain's joint Palestine appeal, lobbying for the creation of a Jewish homeland while her grandmother helped Jewish displaced persons settle in Palestine.

Flanders uses this found footage to present two opposing political positions: the Zionist dream, and what it has turned out to be, at least in her eyes and those of her interviewees, who represent the more radical section of the Israeli left. Whereas the old footage is presented as almost idyllic, showing a group of elegantly-dressed, European-looking elderly people touring the still quite empty land, recent footage is of bulldozers,⁸³ the security fence (or the wall) Israel has started building, and illegal settlements, whose neat houses and streets are then compared with the striking poverty and wreckage of their neighbouring

⁸³ Yosefa Loshitzky has observed the paradoxical image of the bulldozer in the film *Hamsin*, which critiques the confiscation of Arab lands by Jews. Whereas within the Zionist iconography the bulldozer symbolizes the building of a new Jewish homeland, for the Palestinians it "signifies the Zionist passion to expand and demolish traditional, agrarian, rural Palestine" (*Identity Politics* 121).

Palestinian towns. Recent footage also forms the background to short informative texts on the occupation.

However, the found footage has its own sinister undertone, too: the overdressed people in their suits and expensive jewelry seem foreign, unrelated to the land they claim they have a right to. One short sequence, in which the elderly Jewish people are seen travelling in a bus, watching Arabs with camels crossing the dunes through the bus-windows and their dark sunglasses, is especially effective. The windows and their sunglasses' lenses can be seen as screens, which distance them from the unruly wilderness outside. To the viewer they come across as colonial Europeans, alienated from their environment. This is, in fact, the premise of the film. The fact that Flanders is herself a former Israeli (she emigrated from Canada to Israel with her parents as a young girl but then left), back in the country after many years for the making of this movie, suggests an interrupted, fragmentary Jewish existence in Palestine/Israel.⁸⁴

Both old and new footage share a central motif: the land. In Flanders' grandparents' film archive they are seen in the open space, surrounded by dunes, sprinklers watering the earth, making the land bloom and reclaiming the desert, just like Zionist folk imagery. However, by placing them in montage with the newer footage, the old home-movie images take on a completely different meaning. The juxtaposition of recent footage of bulldozers and soldiers throwing hand-grenades, for instance, with the pioneering work Flanders' grandparents were supporting, render the latter early signs of brutality and destruction on the Jewish side, which will grow into full-blown violent occupation in future years. According to Ezra, one of the protagonists of the film, the state's current efforts to green the land that was originally appropriated from the Arabs (as stated by him) are actually part of a scheme to keep it out of Arabs' reach.

The chasm between the past and the harsh reality of the present is the main theme of the film, and is emphasized not only by visual devices but also through the stories of its protagonists. The film moves between the two couples: the Israeli Edit and her Palestinian girlfriend, Samira; and the Israeli Ezra and his Palestinian boyfriend Selim (their surnames are never given). The two couples seem to live

⁸⁴ Flanders is not seen in any frame, but her voice is sometimes heard. Furthermore, the texts that appear on the screen often contain information about her. She is, therefore, an active participant in the film, and her provisional presence in Israel, and in the frame, can be read as carrying a symbolic meaning.

parallel lives, highlighted by their strong commitment to the fight against occupation, but their existence is inherently different: Edit is an Ashkenazi Jew, whose parents fled to Israel to escape persecution in Argentina, whereas Ezra is a Mizrahi Jew, and as such, is doubly marginalized. As a Mizrahi Jew, Ezra's dedication to his political activity, like the relationship he establishes with a Palestinian man, may be seen as an attempt to reconnect with his long lost "oriental" roots, those that have been repressed over the years in order to integrate into Israeli mainstream society, which is, in the main, constructed according to Ashkenazi values. Ezra makes this connection early on in the film, when he tells Flanders how ashamed he felt as a child to speak to his mother in Arabic, the language spoken at home, on the bus. By transgressing both sexual and racial borders, through a union with a gay Arab man, Ezra shows a stronger affiliation to his original Oriental identity than to the forced, artificial Israeli-Ashkenazi identity he has been expected to adopt. Ezra, with his polished Arabic and deep sense of identification with the Palestinians' plight, may be seen as a liminal figure, crossing the boundaries between his Israeli/Jewish identity and his Arab identity.

Likewise, significant differences in legal status, lifestyle and education distinguish Samira from Selim. Samira has presumably been granted a work permit, as she legally works as an oncology nurse in one of the largest hospitals at the centre of Israel whereas Selim is under house arrest in Jerusalem at the time of filming, and has spent, up to that point, 80 months in jail since the beginning of the first Intifada. Unlike Samira, he does not have a profession. He is an amateur photographer who has not been able to pursue a career in the field because of harsh circumstances. He is eventually deported from Israel, an act that brings an end to his relationship with Ezra.

The difference in status, and in personality, also generates different forms of resistance. Whereas Selim comes across as passive, and is shot mainly sitting down, in Ezra's and his apartment, or engaged in domestic, "feminine" activities such as cooking, Samira comes across as active and outspoken. As she explains in the film, "as a person who suffers oppression, at all levels of identity, as a woman, as a lesbian, and as an Arab Palestinian [...] all these threads and complexities of a Palestinian living in Tel Aviv do not allow me to be passive and say 'these problems don't concern me'". She is seen several times throughout the film in



Figs. 5.4, 5.5 Samira (top) and Selim in *Zero Degrees of Separation*.
DVD capture, courtesy of Elle Flanders.

capture, courtesy of David Dettl, www.daviddettl.com, received from the Foundation of David and Lucile Packard Foundation with his permission.

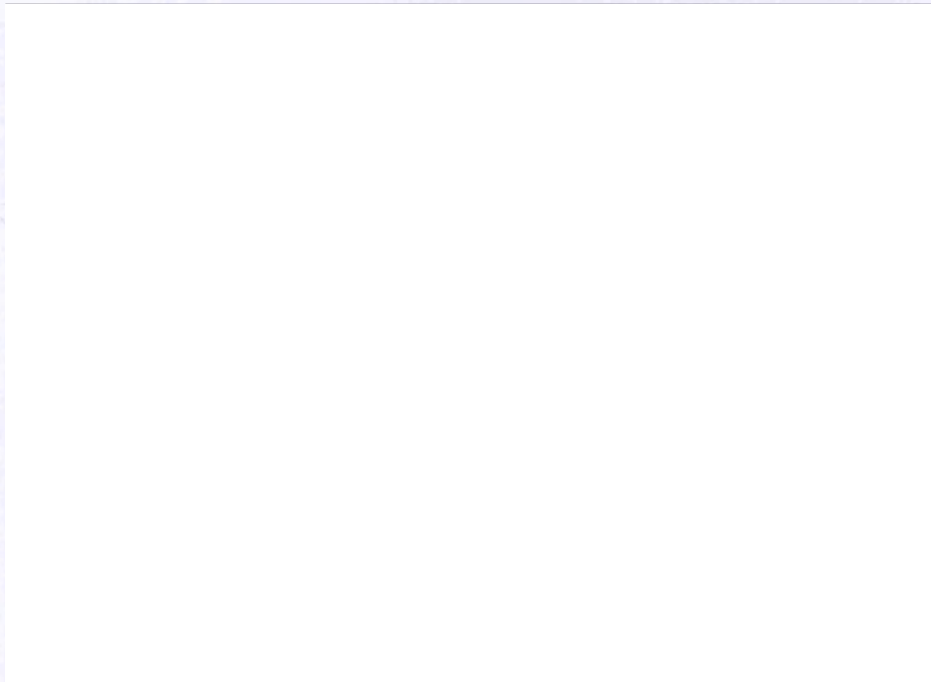


Fig. 5.6 Found footage in *Zero Degrees of Separation*. DVD capture, courtesy of Elle Flanders.



Fig. 5.7 Ezra (right) goes about his political activity in *Zero Degrees of Separation*. DVD capture, courtesy of Elle Flanders.

motion, cycling in Tel Aviv or carrying signs in public demonstrations. She has a proud, defiant sense of self, which Selim seems to lack. Her refusal to accept the rule of the occupier finds expression in her statements regarding terror attacks in Israel or Israel's Independence Day, which for the Palestinian people is known as the *Nakba*, "a day of mourning, not because of Israel's independence but because of other people's grief at whose expense it was achieved". Her participation in Israeli life through both work and her relationship does not mean assimilation, and she does not allow her voice to be mediated by an Israeli point of view. It is little wonder that there are only a few scenes in which Edit and Samira appear together or show signs of affection. Being informed at the end of the film that they have separated, and that Samira has now a new Israeli girlfriend hardly comes as a surprise: if falling in love implies a loss of self, to a certain extent at least, Samira cannot allow herself to do that as this will entail, first and foremost, losing her Palestinian self.

Whereas the film emphasizes the resemblance between Selim and Ezra, and suggests that Ezra, through this relationship, can communicate with his repressed roots, it stresses the inevitable distance between Edit and Samira. As an Israeli citizen of Ashkenazi origin, Edit has a privileged status of which she is aware (at one point in the film she says: "even before I accepted my identity as a Jew who's an occupier, I had to accept that I'm an Ashkenazi who oppresses Mizrachim"). Samira, on the other hand, is a foreigner in what used to be her ancestors' land. Edit's family arrived in Israel from a different continent. In the film, Samira talks about her roots in the land as an indicator of her right to be there. "My existence in this land", she declares, "is very present. I am here – I am not anyone's guest. I'm not apologetic at all about my presence here [...] I'm an indivisible part of this land, this area, this continent. It doesn't exist if I don't exist. If my ancestors don't exist". Samira's words call attention, once again, to the artificial presence of Flanders' grandparents and Edit's parents, as representatives of all of European-origin Jewish settlers, on the land which they claim as theirs.

Both Ezra and Edit, as Israelis, talk about the feelings of disillusionment regarding the state. They both oppose the concept of "enlightened occupation" and attempt to unmask it. Ezra says his education was based on the values of the labour movement, of socialism, of Judaism and of humanism. "I believed in it",

he says, but as an adult he can see that “theory and practice are completely different [...] It infuriates me. We’ve lost many of our qualities”. Similarly, Edit talks about her ambivalent feelings towards Israel. Being the daughter of Argentinean Jews who fled their country, she sees Israel as the place in which her parents’ lives were saved. At the same time, she says: “I have no problem saying that we are to blame. Zionism did not take into account that there was another nation here. It could have been done differently”. She jokingly says she does not know what is worse, being an Israeli or an Argentinean. Towards the end of the film, she points to the most significant difference between herself and her parents: “they came to Israel filled with hope. Israel was a dream come true compared to Argentina. The reality in Israel today is very far from the dream that I was brought up on”.

Ezra goes further: he uses terminology that has clear associations with the Holocaust when he talks about the occupation. Most of the scenes in which he is present are structured as road-movie scenes. Accompanied by a cameraman and Flanders, Ezra goes about his political activity, which, in addition to the actual aid he offers Palestinians, consists of provoking soldiers at the checkpoints, roadblocks and in the occupied territories. Driving along a bypass from Jerusalem to Hebron, the building of which has cut Beitjalla, an Arab village, into two halves, and which only Jews are permitted to use, Ezra comments: “if there’s a problem they build a bypass, and then another. Of course it’s at the taxpayer’s expense, and the expense of the Palestinians’ lands, and it is usually an ‘Aryan’ road – for Jews only”. Later, referring to Israel’s actions towards the Palestinian population, he says: “I call it putting them in ghettos, like in Yatta, like in Hebron. To concentrate them so that they are easier to govern [...] no one cares about what happens there, it is far from sight”. He confronts an officer and a soldier, who hold in their Jeep a blindfolded Palestinian, arrested by them for “looking suspicious”, and they justify their actions by saying they are just following orders. To that Ezra responds, “I don’t want to be rude, but in Germany they also got orders”.

Flanders’ decision to follow the stories of the two couples has its roots in a long tradition in Israeli cinema, in feature films such as *Hamsin* (Daniel Wachsmann, 1982), *The Lover* (*HaMehavev*, Michal Bat Adam, 1986) and *On a Narrow Bridge* (*Gesher Tsar Meod*, Nissim Dayan, 1985). This tradition has

derived, as Yosefa Loshitzky observes, from Western culture, in which “European colonizers and their settler descendants have always been terrified by the prospect of miscegenation” (*Identity Politics* 113). The importance of telling stories of “forbidden love”, as Loshitzky calls them, lies in their power to expose the effects of the conflict and the occupation at the “microlevel”: “[t]he displacement, taking place in Israeli cinema, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the territory of forbidden love, makes it easier for the Israeli audience [...] to encounter the conflict whose roots are complex and painful” (*Identity Politics* 113).

In her analysis of the portrayal of Arab-Jewish relationships in Israeli feature films, Loshitzky referenced Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who observed how these films often follow the model of Greek tragedy (Loshitzky, *Identity Politics* 112-13). Interestingly, *Zero Degrees of Separation*, as a documentary, can be seen to show that real-life experiences are not different from the tragic fictional ones depicted in feature films. *Zero Degrees of Separation* ends on a pessimistic note: Edit and Samira’s relationship has ended and Edit left her job in the Rape Crisis Centre after Ariel Sharon, the then Prime Minister, was invited to speak there; Selim, Ezra’s boyfriend, was deported after losing his case in court (a text appears on the screen, informing the viewer that, when last heard of, Selim got married in Ramallah). And the occupation, Flanders informs the viewers in a short text, continues (“It is January 2005. I witness another Israeli bulldozer destroying a Palestinian house and garden”).

The brief comment on what has possibly happened to Selim since his deportation raises questions regarding Flanders’ agenda on sexuality. Flanders’ decision to discuss the implications of the occupation through the stories of two interracial gay couples brings homosexuality in Israel back to its original activist roots. The lives that the film’s protagonists lead are very different to the commonly accepted notions of gay life in Israel as urban and hedonistic and/or fully adjusted to the heteronormative order, as filmmakers such as Eytan Fox have portrayed. It is not surprising that both Edit and Ezra come from the margins of the gay minority. As a lesbian and as a Mizrahi Jew they do not enjoy the privileges Ashkenazi gay men have. From a gay perspective, the importance of the film is in the representation of different modes of existence within the gay minority, which do not follow the same obvious models, and in the matter-of-fact approach it adopts towards homosexuality and gay identities and relationships.

Having said that, non-Israeli viewers, who are not familiar with Israeli gay culture, will not necessarily realize this, as Flanders hardly explores homosexuality in Israel or, indeed, Palestine, and does not encourage her protagonists to do so. Although it is clearly no accident that the two couples she chose for the film are gay couples, their homosexuality is rendered a marginal, negligible topic. With Selim as an interviewee, the film had the potential to offer an important insight into the ways traditional Palestinian society oppresses its gay members. The fact that Selim is now supposedly a married man could be seen as an indication of an oppressive attitude towards homosexuality. Furthermore, Samira's choice to live in Tel Aviv, and the fact she has had mainly (if not solely) Israeli partners, may have some connection to the way homosexuality is perceived in Palestinian society. However, there is no explicit mention of it in the film.

The filmmakers' evasion of discussion of the homosexuality of the protagonists clashes with its obvious importance. The film marginalizes the protagonists' homosexuality, discouraging spectators from seeing it as a key factor in their existence. Ezra, for instance, hardly refers to his homosexuality as an issue that requires any consideration. Only once, when telling Flanders about another of Selim's many arrests, does he make a point of discussing the policemen's response to them being a gay couple. The rationale behind the decision to tell a moral story about the effects of the occupation in the private domain through a gay filter remains unexplained.

Gan

Gan follows a year in the lives of two teenage male prostitutes working in the area known as Electricity Garden in Tel Aviv. One of them, Dudu, is an Arab-Israeli. The other, Nino, is a Palestinian. The film explores the impasse the two have met in their attempt to escape their circumstances. *Gan* focuses on two main themes in each of the protagonists' life-stories: their religious and racial otherness is one theme; their prostituting themselves is the other (in this sense the film resembles Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (USA, 1967), an experimental film which consists of a two-hour conversation with a middle-aged, African-American,

homosexual prostitute). Together these two conditions form a cycle from which Dudu and Nino cannot escape.

Gan is one of several films made in the past three years about male prostitution. Two short feature films, *Send Me An Angel* (*Shlach Li Mal'ach*, Nir Ne'eman, 2003) and *Good Boys* (*Yeladim Tovim*, Yair Hochner, 2005) have dealt with similar or related themes. Whereas *Send Me An Angel* is a lighthearted comic drama which tells the love story between a young man and a rent boy he invites to his house on his birthday, *Good Boys*, shot in a documentary style by amateur filmmakers on a meagre budget, offers a bleak portrayal of life at the margins of society, without hope of salvation. It is saturated with scenes of extreme violence, including rape and murder, and drug abuse. It has a stereotypically tragic view of male prostitutes as lost and exploited, and as such, it is much closer in spirit to the real-life events of Dudu and Nino in *Gan*.

Both *Good Boys* and *Gan* constitute an alternative to the optimistic, even utopian, gay existence portrayed in Eytan Fox's films. They revisit some of Amos Guttman's major themes, namely the isolation of gay men from the rest of society, a connection between gay life and outlaw existence, and the lack of trust in state institutions to help the individual. Indeed, prostitution as it is depicted in the films, becomes a sign of the imperviousness of the authorities to the plight of the individual. The films equate prostitution with social crisis, while making strong references to the corruption in Israeli politics. In one scene in *Good Boys*, a minister in the government rapes one of the protagonists. The victim is brought to a flat where he is raped by a man he has met in a club. The man turns out to be a sadistic policeman who works as a procurer. In *Gan* the protagonists display the scars that long interrogations by both Israeli and Palestinian secret services, and violence by family members, have inscribed on their bodies. They do not voice their opinions regarding the occupation but merely report its dire consequences on their lives. They mock both Sharon and Arafat, and tear election ads off the walls in a rebellious manner.

For Dudu and Nino life on the street offers them freedom they cannot have elsewhere. Born into Arab families and raised amid poverty and sexual and physical violence, the two adolescents lose faith in the ability of the authorities to help them. Prostitution is portrayed as their act of survival, and resistance. Their insistence that they are the ones who penetrate rather than being penetrated in gay

intercourse has a double meaning: it asserts both their heterosexuality (according to Muslim mores, men who penetrate other men are not considered homosexuals)⁸⁵ and power over their Jewish clients. The streets where they work are the space in which the many restrictions imposed on them in their daily life as Arabs are lifted. "There are no rules on the streets", says Dudu, "you're free".

This freedom, however, changes rapidly into drug abuse and addiction and a series of court appearances. The film illustrates the impasse Dudu and Nino meet, and the incompetence of the authorities in offering real help. At one point, Nino finds his way to a van of Outreach Teen in Tel Aviv, a service for youth in need, after he has run away (not for the first time) from the juvenile reformatory to which he was sent. Describing his feeling of confinement to a social worker, Nino says: "It's as if I'm in the middle and there's a circle around me. I want to go this way, but it's closed. This way, but it's closed. Everything's closed. Even going back to the family is closed. Completely". Nino then tells about a "childish" dream he has, in which he gets a passport, which allows him "to fly away from here".

This wish to run away is expressed several times by Nino and Dudu. The filmmakers, however, underline the impossibility of this dream. Early on in the film, Nino is put in Tel Aviv district prison after being arrested for drug-dealing and robbery. He is not seen in prison, but the camera pans around the building, which resembles a fortress, while Nino's voice is heard, speaking on the phone with Dudu. The camera then follows an aeroplane crossing the dark skies above the prison. The contrast between the immobility of imprisoned Nino, and the freedom that the movement of the aeroplane represents, intensifies the tragic element of his life. Unlike the fictional protagonists of *Good Boys*, Nino does not represent only those who prostitute themselves. He is also a Palestinian who lives illegally in Israel, and whose freedom of movement is restricted by his racial and national identity as much as it is by his profession. Even more than *Zero Degrees of Separation*, *Gan* offers a bleak portrayal of the level of integration of Palestinians and Arab-Israelis in Israeli society. It is especially powerful as it is

⁸⁵ As Jeffrey Weeks has argued, Muslim culture allows, or at least condones, male same-sex activity under certain clearly defined limitations, one of which dictates that Muslim men must be the penetrators. In those countries, Weeks maintains, there is "no concept of 'the homosexual,' except where it has been imported from the West, no notion of exclusive homosexuality, and no gay way of life" ("Foreword" x).

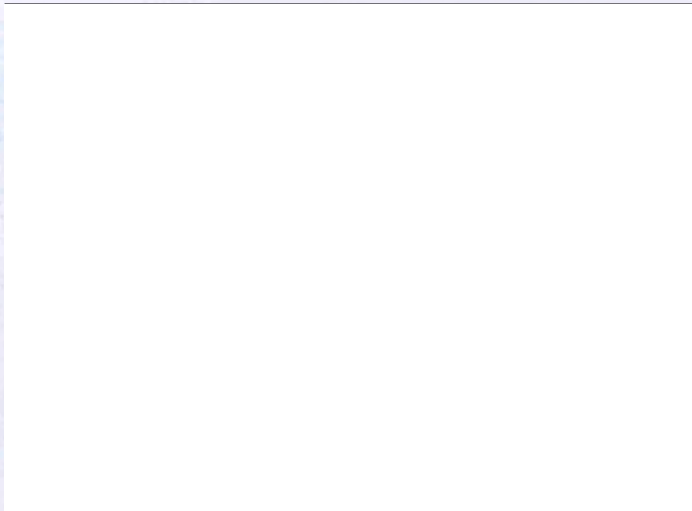
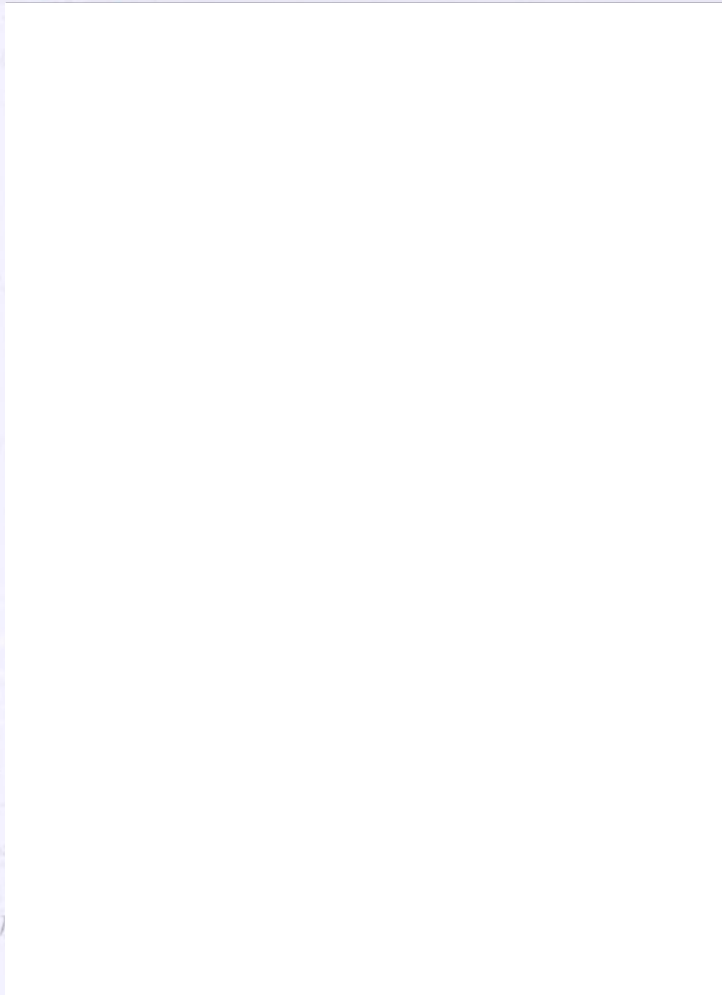


Fig. 5.8 Street life. Nino (left) and Dudu in *Gan*. DVD capture, courtesy of Ruthie Shatz.



Figs. 5.9, 5.10 Nino tears election ads off the walls (top) and mocks Arafat in *Gan*. DVD capture, courtesy of Ruthie Shatz.

one of the few films to present the conflict and its implications from within the Arab/Palestinian perspective.

The only source of solace is the strong bond between the two, who look after each other both emotionally and physically, guiding each other through their frequent encounters with dubious clients, and the authorities, both Israeli and Palestinian. Dudu and Nino met in 2002 while fighting on opposing sides. Their similar backgrounds, however, soon led to a remarkably loyal friendship. They both come from families to which they cannot or do not want to return. Nino's family lives in the occupied territories, and he has not seen his mother for five years. Dudu, who grew up in a violent environment in Hebron, ran away from his family at the age of nine, and found shelter at a house in Jerusalem, owned by a man who was later arrested "because he raped so many kids". They form an alternative family of their own in which they regularly switch roles: it is Dudu who implores Nino to go back to the reformatory and who comes to meet him after his hearing in court. It is Nino who serves as a father figure when he hears that Dudu has taken heroin.

The filmmakers use their protagonists' youth to great effect. Whereas their life experiences may be those of much older people, their facial expressions, speech and juvenile antics are a constant reminder of it. As teenagers whose view of the world has not been entirely formed, they express "unprocessed" emotions. "Dying is better than living like a stray dog. Or I'll go back to jail. Cool, why not?", says Nino. Their readiness to volunteer as suicide bombers ("they can give me a bomb belt, for all I care. I'm fed up with this life", says Nino) is another expression of nihilism which is at the core of their experience. Cinematically, the filmmakers benefit from the full cooperation they have been granted by the teenagers and the people who populate their world, among them other sex workers and a Jewish client, who, for a short time, offers the teenagers a shelter in his house. Their willingness to expose themselves contributes to a highly candid document on a phenomenon that has been, up to this point, underrepresented in mainstream Israeli gay narrative.

Concluding Remarks

More than the previous chapters, this concluding chapter illustrates the diversity of gay, lesbian and queer experiences in contemporary Israel. By exploring different identities and groups within what is often perceived as a homogenous gay community, it challenges the existence of such a community beyond its discursive, imagined borders, thus responding to one of this project's central objectives, as they were laid out in Chapter 1.

If in previous chapters, the films have all shared a focal formal, aesthetic or thematic approach, this chapter is distinctive in that the films discussed in it do not. Indeed, these are all non-fiction films, yet their filmmakers take very different stances towards principal matters such as gay and lesbian identities, the gay community, and its involvement in Israeli society. I have attempted to analyze the films according to some nodal points, namely formal and visual concerns, thematic concerns and the question of biography/autobiography. Whereas some films tackle all of the above, others focus on only one or two aspects.

In the theoretical introduction to this chapter, I linked the increasing number of gay documentaries in recent decades to a similar trend in international gay documentary filmmaking, in which new formal means have been tested in order to undermine conventional, fixed categories of sexuality and identity in general. As much as I believe this international movement has inspired many filmmakers in Israel, there are only a very few Israeli films that genuinely achieve this formal subversion. *Last Post* and *Zero Degrees of Separation* are two such films. But even if most of the films are still conventionally scripted and constructed (most probably for commercial reasons, as the majority of them, as I have stated above, were made for TV), they convey, especially when seen and discussed together, the many shapes Israeli gay identity and community have been taking in the past few years, and hint at future developments.

Conclusion

Four years after the second Intifada began a short student film chronicling the early days of the conflict toured the international film festival circuit to great acclaim. The film, *A Different War* (*Milchama Acheret*, 2004), directed and written by Nadav Gal, tells the story of Noni (Shimon Amin), a sensitive, “feminine” boy from Gilo, a Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Suffering under heavy fire out of the Arab village of Beitjalla, the residents of Gilo were expected to put up a bold front in the face of this old-new threat. They became the heroes of the day, and the focus of media attention.

Noni’s father has been called up to the army, and it is Tzahi (Hillel Kappon), his slightly older brother, who embodies the role of the “man” in the household. He portrays a certain kind of masculine role: every day he and his friends climb up the “defense wall” dividing the Arabs from the Jews, shouting “death to Arabs”. Noni is forced to join them, and is encouraged to take part. But Noni has other things on his mind, like putting on make up and trying on his mother’s clothes. The realm of “the feminine” is a site from which Noni can resist the Zionist-Israeli, heteronormative, militaristic mindset. His refusal to play the role of King David in a school play based on the story of David and Goliath further highlights the manner in which his “sissiness” defies both contemporary Israeli machismo, and the biblical heroic tales, which, to a certain extent, have fed it.

Noni’s sissiness serves as a disruptive force. It breaks away from the Zionist-Israeli narrative, in which masculinity, militarism and heterosexism are intertwined. Noni is a truly subversive figure: in the scene that ends the film, he is forced to climb up the wall once again. Unlike in his previous attempts, however, Noni does not go down immediately and run away. Instead, he remains standing on the wall, his eyes fixed on the Arab village seen in the distance, and then he starts dancing.

With *A Different War* Israeli gay cinema came full circle. As I noted in the introductory chapter, the first films to include homosexual characters, either

explicitly gay or merely hinted at, such as *They Call Me Shmil* (*Kor'yim Li Shmil*, George Ovadia, 1973) and *Fine Trouble* (*Eize Yofi Shel Tsarot*, Assi Dayan, 1976) singled them out as grotesquely feminine. They were marginal to the plot, and their marginality was emblematic of their standing in society. *A Different War* utilizes similar motifs, but the “feminine” nature of its young male protagonist, which implies his future sexual orientation (although this is not made explicit), is portrayed as a welcome alternative to Israeli masculine and militaristic culture. The ambivalence regarding homosexuality expressed in previous films does not exist in *A Different War*. Rather, the film takes a sympathetic stance towards non-normative practices and views them as a source of hope for a change.

The relationship between different gay groups, gay men in particular, and Israeli mainstream culture, has always been ambiguous. Excluded at first, gay men created an urban culture which dissociated itself from Israeli culture and society. Tel Aviv was the metropolitan centre where Israeli gay culture could evolve. The films of Amos Guttman, the majority of which are set in that city, assisted in the creation of a gay “separatist” ethos. The characters in his films show as little interest in the mainstream culture in which they live as the mainstream culture shows in them. Guttman went further, though, by rejecting not only the mainstream ideology but also the prevalent politics of the gay community, which aspired to fit in with the master Zionist-Israeli narrative. His “obsession” with marginality is conveyed not only in the films’ bold themes and narratives but also in their visual dimension, namely the “excessive” and artificial *mise-en-scène*, the use of lighting and the shooting of interiors. Taken together, these two aspects show how Guttman created some of the most daring films in the history of Israeli cinema.

The films of Eytan Fox, however, present an opposite position: his gay characters command the screen (and the army units where they serve), but their homosexuality is, for the most part, stripped away, leaving them to act just like their heterosexual counterparts, assimilated and immersed into the mainstream culture to the extent that they pose no, or very little, challenge to the norm. Unlike Guttman’s, Fox’s films draw on commercial cinema and follow Hollywood generic conventions, both thematically and visually. They are an example of the alliance between the liberal-left bloc and the gay community. The films negate the diversity of gay voices and experiences. It is little wonder that Fox’s films have

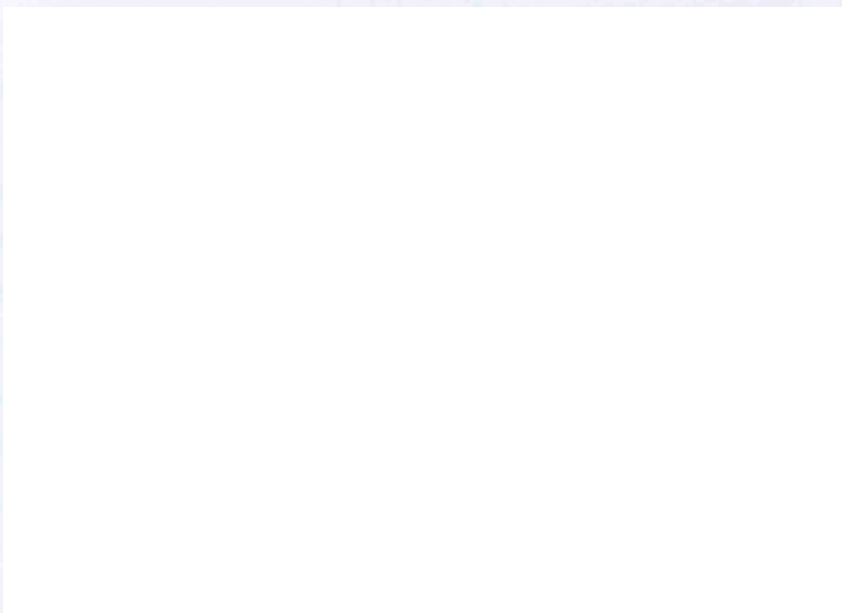


Fig. 6.1 Noni (Shimon Amin) puts on make up in *A Different War*. DVD capture, courtesy of the Sam Spiegel Film School.

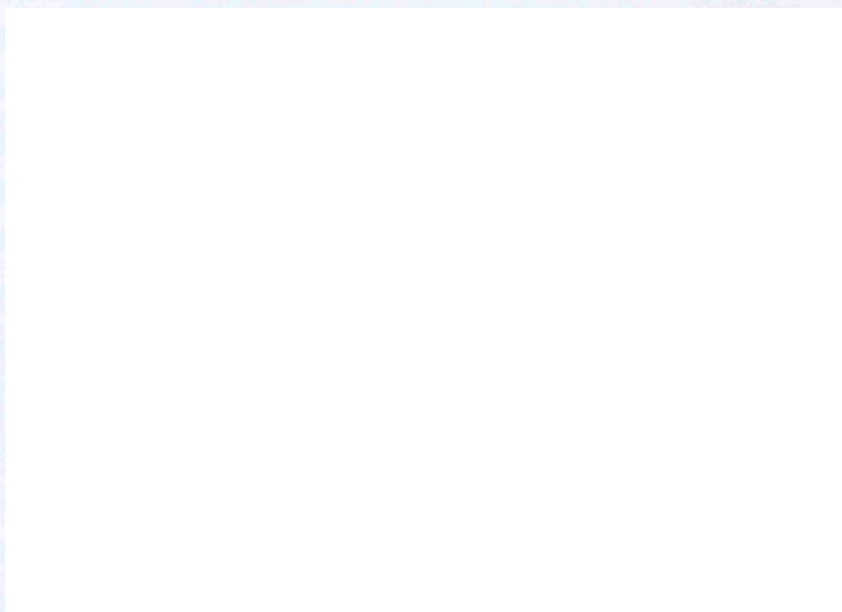


Fig. 6.2 Noni dances on the wall. DVD capture, courtesy of the Sam Spiegel Film School.

become successful among non-gay audiences. By including gay characters the films supposedly highlight Israeli society's liberal stance towards those who are different from the norm. This common perception of Fox's films, however, masks Fox's, and his films', conservative and limited view of homosexuality.

A Different War is one of a growing number of films that attempt to deal with questions of sexual otherness in Israel today without ignoring mainstream culture altogether on the one hand or uncritically embracing it on the other. It represents a wish for "normalization" of a sort, which views gay groups, although different, as an inseparable part of contemporary Israeli society. This is a similar aspiration to that which Fox presents in his films, but whereas Fox assumes gay men are the ones who need to adjust to the dominant culture, namely to become more "virile" and to downplay their gayness, Gal does not. His film celebrates its protagonist's difference, which he sees as an alternative to existing models of masculinity. Unlike Jagger in *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), Noni is not "punished" for what he is, and unlike the gay characters in *Walk on Water* (2004), his "feminine" side and alleged homosexuality are not pushed outside the frame of Israeli discourse. On the contrary, by remaining true to himself, he is able to stand up to the pressure put on him by society (represented here by his teacher, his brother and his brother's friends), and to herald a change.

Israeli Gay men and lesbians' growing confidence has brought them in recent years to engage with other, still unresolved, matters within their own community in particular, and in Israeli society in general. Now that homosexuality in itself is not as controversial an issue as it once was, many filmmakers attend to stories, either fictional or non-fictional, in which the protagonists' sexuality is, though important, often just another identity category. In many of those films sexual matters illuminate other modes of oppression, in and outside the gay community, related to ethnicity, religion or gender.

Soon after the completion and submission of this thesis, a new documentary by Tomer Heymann, *Paper Dolls (Bubot Shel Neeyar, 2006)* will open in Israel. The film, based on a TV series of the same title first broadcast in 2005, documents the "drag queen scene" of the Filipino community in southern Tel Aviv. As I have not yet seen the film, I will not be able to review it here. At the same time, it is safe to assume that the sexuality of the film's protagonists is intersected with other, no less important, issues. The legal status and rights of

foreign workers in Israel has been a highly contested topic for many years. It is likely that these issues, which have only an indirect relation to the protagonists' sexuality, will take up a central place in the film.

Similarly, many of the films discussed in Chapter 5 deal with especially vulnerable subgroups within the gay population whose members' lives do not match the self-assured image the gay community has achieved, in the media at least. *Zero Degrees of Separation* (2005) and *Gan* (2003), for example, deal with the plight of Arab-Israelis and Palestinians, who are either gay or caught in the hopeless world of the sex industry. As much as their homosexuality is a site of conflict, other factors such as the Israeli occupation, its implications and the constant threat of deportation play a bigger and more acute role in their lives, and consequently, in the films in which they are featured. *Say Amen!* (2005) focuses on the acceptance of gayness in conservative religious communities, and opens up broader questions regarding generational clashes of views, lifestyles and traditions. *Yakantalisa* and *Positive Story* (both 1996) deal with HIV and AIDS, a disease which the gay community and *Agudah* have only rarely addressed.⁸⁶ And *Almost There* (2004) offers a possible answer to why there are only a handful of films made by, about or for lesbians. The protagonists' decision to leave for Greece attests to the minor part that lesbians take in both gay and mainstream discourses in Israel. More generally, it demonstrates the unequal standing of women in male-dominated cultures and sub-cultures alike.

This openness to previously unexplored themes is evidence of the shift of focus that characterizes the more established gay groups in Israel. Gay filmmaking, it seems, can now attend to the needs of the "other" within the gay community. The self-reflexive nature and "narcissism" (Shohat 215) of Amos Guttman's *Drifting* (1983), for instance, and Eytan Fox's neo-colonial view of Israelis of Mizrahi-origin in *Gotta Have Heart* (1997) are replaced by filmmaking that tries to raise awareness of different forms of exclusion, and to find solutions for it.

This new sensitivity crosses the boundaries of the gay minority itself and links it to other minorities in Israeli society, whose members, like gay men and lesbians, have struggled to achieve recognition and rights while developing their

⁸⁶ AIDS is also the theme of Dan Wolman's latest feature film *Tied Hands* (*BeYadayim Kshurot*, 2006).

own identity and culture. For as different as Israeli minorities may be from one another, they all share the narrative of exclusion that has shaped their identity vis-à-vis a discriminating establishment.

Gay men and lesbians constitute only one of many groups that have been formed as cultural, social and, at times, political entities since the vision of the Israeli melting-pot started to fade in the late 1970s. This process accelerated in the late 1980s and 1990s, years in which “the multicultural critique of the melting pot has been at the center of public and scholarly discourse in Israel” (Gutwein 223). Shifting the rigid boundaries between centre and periphery, as well as the perceptions of normative and non-normative practices in Israel, has had significant implications for both dominant and once-marginalized groups in Israel.

This thesis may open a window onto matters of representation of other minorities in Israel. Drawing on this study, and on similar projects which focus on cinematic representation of certain ethnic, racial, religious or sexual groups within new “multicultural” Israeli society, further exploration of its shifting demographic composition might illuminate the broader changes Israel has undergone in recent years. In order to do that, it would be highly significant, I believe, to look at these once-marginalized groups as a single movement that has changed not only the nature of Israeli film, but Israeli society as a whole. Serving as an important means by which to forge a national identity in the early decade of the state, Israeli cinema now functions not only as a reflection of it but also in part as a vehicle of its undoing.

In order to comprehend the connections between the many different groups that populate the State of Israel, it is important to explore the way in which they are bound together, in relation to the “norm” and national core ideals. Cinema might serve as a means to start looking at these groups and sub-groups – sexual, ethnic, and religious. By treating the films about their experiences as constituting a single project, one can come to challenge the very fundamentals of the culturally constructed Israeli identity. Orthodox Jews, members of the Druze community, and gay men and lesbians may not be obvious bedfellows in academic discussion. However, consideration of their combined cinematic representations and misrepresentations should shed new light on the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in contemporary Israeli society. In other words, it is by placing the array of voices expressed in Israeli cinema of the past 20 years within

a larger and shared context – one that has been defined by a series of drastic changes that rapidly transformed the country and its culture – that one may point to the dramatic directions Israeli society has moved in since the late 1970s.

It would be interesting to see whether the particular case of gay and lesbian filmmaking, studied in detail in this thesis, might become the base of a new study, larger in scope, which could further trace the links between an ever-changing Israeli society and its film industry. As more groups are now claiming recognition on the screen and in culture in general, Israeli cinema is becoming a major site where one can examine those shifts. New Israeli films, although they vary in their subject matter, production values and political aspirations, all point to the fabricated nature of the “normative” Israeli ethos and the instability of the Israeli master narrative, in order to assert other “minor” identities and agendas. A mosaic of diverse voices and experiences is finally coming to light, and to the screen.

Filmography

English title [original title], director, release date (the country of production of all films is Israel, unless otherwise stated)

Adama, Helmer Lerski, 1947

All That Heaven Allows, Douglas Sirk, USA, 1955

Almost There [Kim'at Sham], Sigal Yehuda and Joelle Alexis, 2004

Amazing Grace [Chesed Mufla], Amos Guttman, 1992

Amos Guttman: Film Director [Amos Guttman: Bi'mai Kolnoa], Ran Kotzer, 1997

Apocalypse Now, Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979

The Aunt from Argentina [HaDoda meArgentina], George Ovadia, 1983

Bar 51 (also known as *Orphans of the Storm* and *Sister of Love*), Amos Guttman, 1985

Big Eyes [Eynayeem G'dolot], Uri Zohar, 1974

Big Girl [Yalda G'dola], Nirit Yaron, 1987

Blow Job, Andy Warhol, USA, 1964

Blow Up, Michaelangelo Antonioni, UK, 1966

The Bubble [Habu'a], Eytan Fox, 2006

Crows [Orvim], Ayelet Menahemy, 1987

Death Cause: Homophobia [Sibat Ha'Retzach: Homophobia], Ran Kotzer, 2003

Despair [Eine Reise ins Licht], Rainer Werner Fassbinder, West Germany/France, 1977

Desperately Seeking Susan, Susan Seidelman, USA, 1985

Different From the Others [Anders als die Anderen], Richard Oswald, Germany, 1919

A Different Shadow [Tsel Acher], Ron Asulin, 1983

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